Gregory Benford: The Science Fiction Century

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Ninety Percent Of Everything

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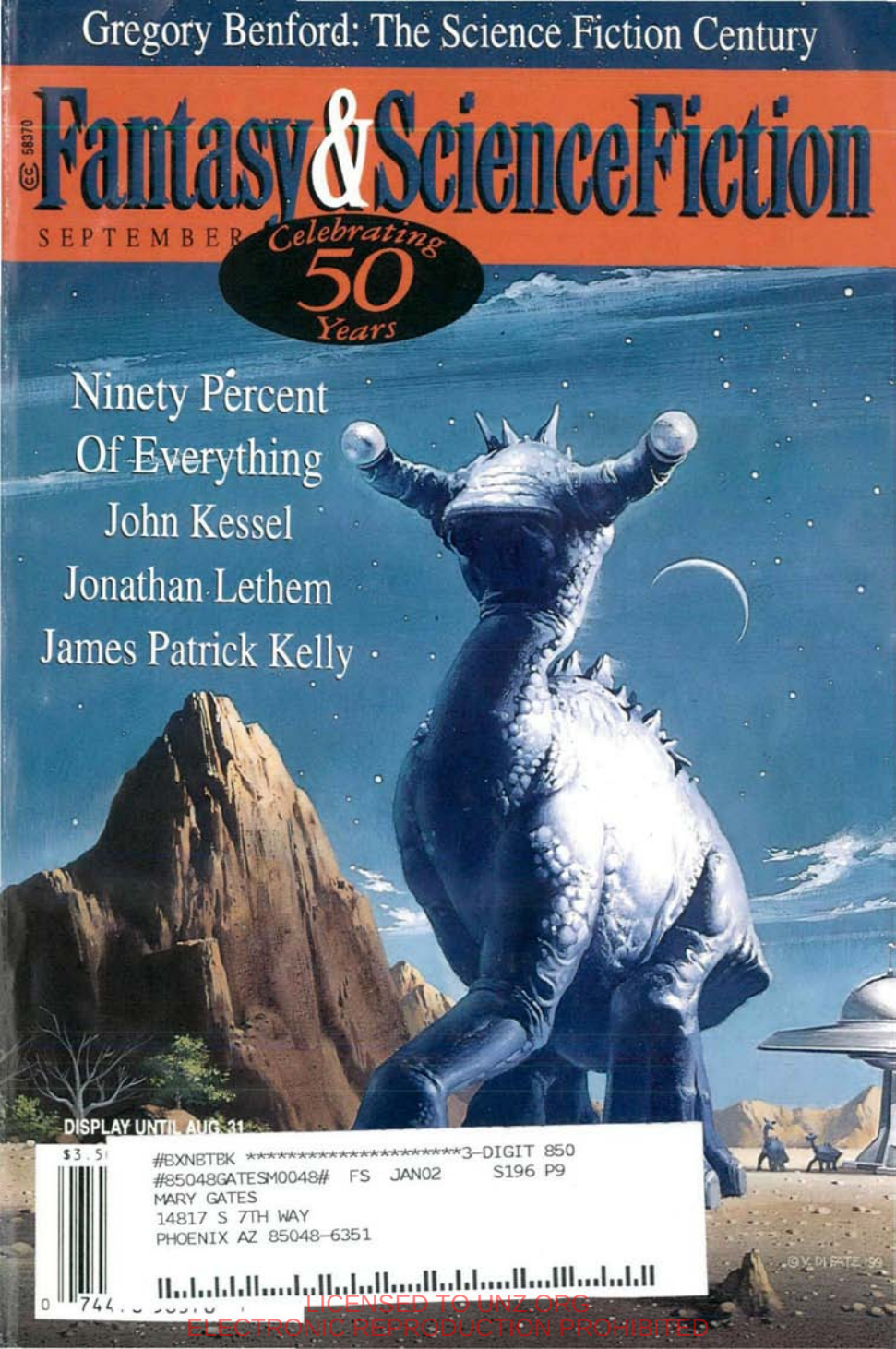

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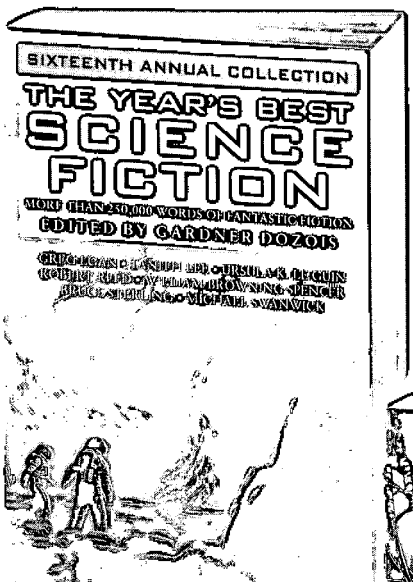

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THE MAGAZINE OF

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September • 50th Year of Publication

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Michael Meddor is a self-described baby boomer who served in the Army and wrote games for Apple II computers before landing his current job of running "really big" mainframe computers. The coast-to-coast cyber-romance that brought him and his wife together predates the advent of personal computers. Now that his children have grown up and moved out, he's using some of his spare time for reading and writing. This fantasy—his debut story—suggests that the dictum regarding old soldiers and death might also apply to old sorcerers.

The Wizard Retires

By Michael Meddor

YOU WOULD THINK THAT after two thousand years of mostly sane and sober living he might have put away a little something for his old age. But all he had was a pink stucco house across the street from his granddaughter, plus the little bit of money she gave him each week for babysitting Karen. He had no pension, no Social Security, no $10,000 CDs. He made the same mistake a lot of us make; he thought he would never get old. After all, wizards are only human too.

It was a day when dogwoods and azaleas bloomed, when the scent of new flowers perfumed the breeze, when every lawn needed its first mowing. Woolerey shuffled down the sidewalk leaning on his cane, watching Karen chase his cat, Britannia, half a block ahead. Karen was ten. He took care of her every day after school. In fact, he bought the house across the street precisely for that purpose. Now he wished he hadn't.

There were signs, of course, but at first he thought he was just seeing things. He'd been cooped up all winter and he was getting pretty old. But

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lately Karen was seeing things too, though she didn't know what they meant. Yesterday a car with tinted glass passed them three times. Karen pointed at it and said the driver must be lost. The car sped away. There were other little things too: stray dogs with odd markings, a squirrel that couldn't climb and showed no fear of Mrs. Swanson's cat (which killed it but wouldn't eat it), and strange, ugly birds that flocked in the neighborhood each evening.

He should have moved on years ago. He had done just that uncounted times in the past. The safety of his family was paramount, even though it was a different family each time. Who could blame an old wizard for a sense of security? The house was comfortable, the climate pleasant, the neighbors remarkably un-nosy. He adored his great-granddaughter. Why shouldn't he stay?

Because they found him, that's why.

Britannia disappeared around the corner, chasing a squirrel across Mrs. Bailey's yard. Karen, blocked by the Baileys' fence, rejoined Woolerey and took his hand. "How old is Britannia, Grandpa?"

"I don't know, Sweetheart. I guess she's older than most cats."

"I bet she's not as old as you are, huh?"

"No. Cats don't live as long as people do."

She swung his arm back and forth a couple of times. "How come you named her Britannia?"

"That's where I lived before I came here," he said.

"I thought you came from England."

"Well, I did. That's just another name for it."

Britannia reappeared at the corner, and Woolerey took immediate notice — her tail was up and her back was arched. She glared at a young man who stood in the shade of a pine tree. Woolerey kept walking until he was a few feet away and could see the man better. There was nothing threatening about him. He wore a well-cut gray suit and expensive-looking shoes (which marked him as an outsider in this casual suburb). He seemed young, no more than twenty-five or twenty-six, yet somehow Woolerey knew he was older than that. Quite a bit older.

"Are you Francis Woolerey?" the man asked.

"Yes. Who are you?"

The man smiled. It was an attractive smile, confident and charming.

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He had the look of an athlete, a man who would be comfortable wherever he happened to be. "They call me David."

Woolerey wondered if he should recognize him. "What can I do for you, David?"

"A member of the Academy asked me to look you up."

Woolerey nodded. He started walking again and David fell in beside him. Karen followed shyly. From her expression Woolerey guessed that she did not like the stranger. "Now that you know who I am," Woolerey said to David, "I suppose you'll be reporting back. Or are you supposed to keep an eye on me?"

"That would be telling, wouldn't it? May I walk you home?"

"It's a free country."

"So I've heard." David nodded toward the cat. "Is that Britannia?"

"Yes."

"I understand she's a most remarkable familiar."

"A very loyal one," Woolerey said. "Anyone else would have left me long ago."

"And the child? A relative?"

"My great-granddaughter."

David lapsed into silence. Woolerey noticed the younger man's gaze wander over the houses, the yards, the cars passing by. "What are you thinking?" Woolerey prompted.

David returned his gaze to Woolerey, his face as expressionless as a professional card player's. "Forgive me for asking, but do you intend to resist?"

"Of course."

"It's just that I — that is, the Academy — they've always told us so much about you, but now you seem so, so — "

"Old?"

"Yes. Forgive me. Old." He seemed embarrassed under Woolerey's stare. "You must have lost control of the Scepter by now. I understand a certain amount of physical strength is needed to use it safely. Wouldn't it be better just to give it to us and avoid a struggle?"

"Too late for that," Woolerey said.

"They'll come for it," David told him.

"I'm sure they will."

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"You haven't used the Scepter in two thousand years," David said, "or they would have found you sooner. Now you're too old and too frail to use it. You've got a tiger by the tail, Mr. Woolerey, and you don't know how to let go."

"What I did once I can do again," Woolerey said.

"Think of the little girl," David said. "When things get messy, she'll be in terrible danger."

Woolerey poked a trembling finger into David's chest. "If you even *think* that again, I'll drop you where you stand."

David paled, but made no reply.

Woolerey examined the young man, puzzled. "You're not what I expected," he said. "You look more like a lawyer than what you are."

"As a matter of fact, I was a lawyer. I wasn't quite as good as I wanted to be, though."

"I see. And there are more like you?"

"A few," David said.

Woolerey resumed his walk and turned onto Gerald Street. David fell in beside him again. Woolerey saw Britannia scoot ahead and squeeze through the white picket fence around his yard. Karen took his hand as if she might protect him from David.

"It's a nice little house," David said. "I especially like the garden. So many beautiful flowers. It's the kind of place a man might like to retire to, I think."

"I actually thought I was retired until you showed up."

"Then why fight us? Bow out gracefully. Stay retired. I don't see how you can win."

"If they make me fight," Woolerey said, "I will win, and I will survive."

"Because you have the Scepter?"

Woolerey nodded. "That, and Britannia."

"With all due respect to Britannia, sir, I don't think you quite realize how many servants the Academy has now. Antipas will take the Scepter back. You cannot prevent it. With the whole Academy behind him, he's too strong for you."

"We'll see."

"You tried to beat them two thousand years ago, and you couldn't

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finish them off. A hundred years ago you sensed them coming and you ran. You hid. This time you can't run and you can't hide. Give Antipas what he wants. You can retire, or you can rejoin the Academy, whatever you like. All we want is the Scepter."

Woolerey shook his head. "Not a tempting offer, David."

Britannia waited for him just inside the gate. Woolerey lifted the latch, pushed the gate open, and he and Karen went through. David stayed behind on the sidewalk. Woolerey held the gate for him, but David spread his hands in embarrassment. "I can't go through," he said. "I don't know how. I'm only an apprentice."

Woolerey's eyebrows went up. "How long have you been an apprentice?" he asked.

"Fifty-seven years."

"Don't you think that's a long time to be an apprentice?"

"They say I haven't much aptitude."

"You seem capable enough to me. Why are they holding you back?"

"I don't know that they are."

"Take my word for it; they are. How many new wizards have there been in the last fifty-seven years?"

"None. They say we've learned too much science by the time we start training."

"They're just using you, David."

"That may be," David said. "But it doesn't matter. I'm obligated to them, and I do as they say."

"And yet here you are, having a conversation with me. You were told to find me, not chat me up. Do they know what you are doing?"

David shrugged.

"You're hoping I'll rejoin the Academy, aren't you? You think your chances will be better with me around." David did not answer. "Why not switch sides now while you have the chance? You know you're itching to do it."

David shook his head regretfully. "I've been thinking about that ever since I found you," he said. "I wish I had the guts to do it, I really do, but I don't. Because in my evaluation — if I thought for one minute you were going to win — " David took a step back, then turned and walked away.

Karen slammed the gate with a bang. Woolerey moved toward the

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house, but paused on the path, surrounded by his rose bushes. He touched a fresh red blossom, thrilling as always to its feel of newness and promise.

Karen ran to his side. "Who was that man?" she asked.

Woolerey plucked a brown leaf from one bush and looked to see if there were any more. "A friend of a friend."

"Why is he mad at you?"

"He wants something I have."

"The Scepter?"

"So you heard that, did you?"

"Are you a king, Grandpa?"

"No, Sweetheart, It's not that kind of Scepter."

"But you do magic."

A sense of dread made him stop and look at her. "How much of this have you figured out, Karen?"

"I only know you do magic," she said. "You do funny little things when you think I'm not watching."

"I should have been more careful."

"What will he do if he gets the Scepter?"

"Terrible things," he said. He turned away from his roses and faced the flower bed in front of the porch where he had red and yellow tulips coming up. "Worse than Hitler, worse than Pol Pot."

"Why don't you break it then? That way nobody could have it."

"I can't break it, Sweetheart. I don't know how. I don't think even Varan knows how."

She gave him a queer look as if she had never before imagined there was something he could not do. "Who's Varan?" she asked.

"He's the man who made the Scepter."

"Did he give it to you?"

"Yes."

"Was he a nice man?"

"A nice man?" Woolerey considered. "No. Not really. But he did the right thing when the time came."

He took her hand and they went up the front steps. He touched the doorknob with the tip of his cane. The door had not been opened since he left. He turned the knob and went in, surveying the living room and the kitchen. The delicate balance of the house had not been disturbed.

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Britannia ran playfully through the traps, springing them all. "The house is secure," Woolerey said, more to himself than to Karen.

He went into the kitchen to check on his food supplies. Looking out the window, he saw a huge black dog on the sidewalk. There was another one in the shadow of a tree across the street. He heard the front door open. "Karen, don't go out!" He hurried into the living room. He nearly fell when he snagged his cane on a chair leg. Karen was already outside, but she hadn't left the porch. The dog on the sidewalk stared at her, its tongue lapping sharp, yellow teeth. The other dog crossed the street, heading for the gate.

Karen backed up until she met Woolerey in the doorway. She hugged him around the waist. Her arms were cold. "They aren't real dogs, are they?" she asked.

"No, Sweetheart, they aren't." He led her inside and closed the door.

"Will they let me go home?"

He shook his head.

"Mommy and Daddy will worry," Karen said.

"I know they will," Woolerey told her. He took a ring off his right hand and gave it to her. "Whenever you see anything or anybody that scares you tonight, you hold this up and point it at them. As long as you stay in the house you'll be safe. Do you understand that?" She nodded. "Good. Keep it in your pocket until you need it."

DAVID OPENED the door of his hotel room and found Antipas waiting for him, sitting in the only armchair. He closed the door and locked it.

"It's him?" Antipas asked. He wore a long red robe. Anyone seeing him might have taken him for a Cardinal if it hadn't been for the shoulder length white hair tied back in a ponytail. His face would have given him away too. His frown was so perpetual it might have been cast in bronze.

"It's him," David said.

Antipas's head bobbed almost imperceptibly, which was probably as close as he would ever come to a smile. "How does he look?"

"Old. Oldest man I ever saw. Walking with him is like walking with molasses."

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"We knew he would be old."

David sat on the bed. He was relieved to find Antipas in a rare good mood. It would make things easier. "How is it that he's so much older than you?"

Antipas glanced up at his apprentice, but there was no suspicion in the look. "He did his time traveling the hard way. If not for the Scepter, he would have died long ago."

A pop behind David's back made him turn around with a start. The Twins, Jayrud and Jayrina, slowly spiraled out of thin air, dressed in jeans and T-shirts. Jayrud wore a baseball cap and held a hot dog in his hand. Jayrina carried a souvenir pennant. "The White Sox pulled it out," Jayrud said.

"Five to four," Jayrina said.

"You like baseball?" David asked.

"Just started taking an interest in it..." Jayrud said.

"...yesterday," Jayrina said. "We're going to see..."

"...Babe Ruth tomorrow."

David was about to tell them Babe Ruth was dead when he realized that, under the circumstances, it didn't matter.

"Not tomorrow," Antipas said from his chair. His voice was almost gay, something David had never heard before. "David has news for us."

"You found him?" asked Jayrud.

"I talked to him," David said. "I don't imagine we'll have much trouble with him."

"That's what you think," Jayrina said.

"Is Varan coming?" Jayrud asked.

Antipas nodded. "Varan will be here. Despite what David says, I'm certain we'll need him."

"Who is this Varan?" David asked.

"Oh, nobody," Jayrina said.

"Just," Jayrud said, "the man who made the Scepter. That's all."

David looked at Antipas. "How did Woolerey end up with it then?"

Antipas's gay mood vanished. "Varan give it to him, that's how. By the time I found out what the old fool had done, Woolerey was using the Scepter to lock me and the rest of the Academy, including Varan, inside our own building. Then he moved the building elsewhere."

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"Elsewhere?"

"Elsewhere."

"He thought we were trapped for good," Jayrud said.

"Forever," Jayrina said, and laughed.

Antipas glared at the Twins, but they did not subside. It was not in their nature to subside.

"So this Varan is on our side now?" David asked.

"He got us out," Antipas said. "He was the only one who could have."

"Even if it did take him thirty-four years," Jayrina said.

"During which time he died," Jayrud said. "Along with just about everybody else."

David stood up as if he had just realized that the bed was a trap. Antipas regarded him coldly. "Yes, David," he said. "We are all that is left of the Academy."

"But I thought...." David's confusion clouded his face. "I thought...."

"You heard some stories of the old days," Antipas said, "and you assumed all our colleagues still lived."

David's confusion vanished, a hard-eyed look taking its place. "So there's just you three, and Woolerey has the Scepter."

"Don't forget Varan," Jayrina said, waving her pennant merrily. "Even though he is a bit deceased."

"You're counting on a dead man?" David asked.

Jayrina giggled. "Let's just say he needs the Scepter even more than we do."

David turned his back on the Twins and directed his full attention to Antipas. "You know, your position would be stronger if you had given your apprentices better training," he said.

Antipas gazed at him quizzically. "Are you reproaching me, David?"

"No, sir. But I've been doing my time traveling the hard way too, and I guess I'm just wondering what I have to look forward to."

Antipas's expression did not change, but his eyes gave an impression of amusement. "More of the same I should think. Were you expecting anything in particular?"

David knew he was on dangerous ground, but that was not the answer he wanted to hear. "Perhaps I should go into some other line of work," he said.

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One of the twins snorted. Antipas continued to sit calmly in the armchair, his eyes turned up a little so he could see David's face clearly. "Another line of work, David? Are you sure this is the right time to be making career changes?"

"I realize I'm just one of a half dozen junior partners and I can be replaced, but you've been stringing me along now for over five decades. If I'm still not ready to step up, then I've been wasting my time."

Jayrina said, "Take my word for it, you're not ready." She was leaning casually against the dresser. "Maybe after tonight you'll have a better idea of what you lack."

David asked Antipas, "Why should I run great risks for no gain?"

"Because I insist."

David shook his head. "I want out."

Antipas said, "You are mine, David. There is no such thing as out." He raised his hand, palm down, as if measuring the height of a child, then lowered it slowly. David felt a great weight settle on his will and push it down, push it deep down into his psyche where he would never find it again.

WOOLEREY'S HOUSE and yard were no longer in the ordinary world. Night fell, and with it came a strange darkness devoid of moon or stars. He could see his rose garden and his lawn and his white picket fence, but beyond the fence there was nothing but blackness. Water and electricity were cut off. Even his battery-operated radio received nothing but static.

Karen was on the floor reading a book by flashlight. Woolerey sat facing the picture window in his favorite stuffed chair, waiting for Antipas to come. Britannia rested on his lap, her head lying on the arm of the chair. Not long after dark her ears perked up and she raised her head. A vague sound in the air raised her hackles. She jumped down and went to the door.

Karen looked up, then switched off the flashlight and went to the window.

"Don't leave the house," Woolerey said. "They can't hurt you as long as you stay inside. Okay?"

"Okay."

He put on a sweater and went out to the gate with Britannia. There

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were four disturbances in the air, just outside the white fence. They were like the heat waves you see over summer-fried pavement, growing more substantial each second, taking on human shape. Despite the darkness he knew which was which.

The one nearest the gate was Antipas. His red robe seared the air like a column of hot coals. Symbols of the Knowledge were embroidered into the cloth with silver thread, thread that seemed to be molten and flowing.

The Twins stood beside Antipas, dressed in identical robes of green silk. They were both small, he dark, she fair. They watched Woolerey with amused interest. They had always been amused by him, as they were by most things.

The fourth figure did not solidify as the others had. It remained nothing more than the vague shape of a man. It was like a negative, visible but somehow wrong. Misty and indistinct, the man clung to his staff as if he might blow away in the wind. Woolerey averted his eyes, appalled.

Antipas finally spoke. "We have searched a long time for you, brother." The air glowed crimson around him.

"I thought you might."

"You know what we want."

"Yes, I know. But I had good reasons to take it, and I have good reasons to keep it." He glanced at the fourth figure in spite of himself, and looked away again quickly.

Antipas noticed his discomfort. "Varan is beyond your reasons," he said. "Varan is dead." Woolerey's eyes snapped back to the shadowy figure. "Even death could not free him from the Scepter's binding. He is trapped between life and death and he can have neither."

Woolerey said, "I'm sorry, Varan. I hoped it would be different."

The figure moved a misty hand, but did not speak.

Jayrud stepped forward and cautiously probed toward the gate with his hand. "You are well defended, brother." He glanced at Antipas for his cue. Antipas nodded. "David tells us you intend to resist. We hope you'll reconsider."

Woolerey shook his head. "There's nothing to reconsider," he said.

"Think of the little girl," Jayrud said. "What will happen if we must fight?"

"Surely you wouldn't harm a helpless child?"

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Jayrud shrugged, glanced again at Antipas, and then stepped back.

It began then. A strong wind built up outside the fence, swirling like a twister. Strange shapes crept out of the black shadows. "Your last chance," Antipas warned. "You have my amnesty if you yield." He waited for Woolerey's response. There was none. He raised his arm, still waiting. Seconds passed. Anger twitched across his face. He dropped his arm sharply.

A small army of misshapen creatures advanced to the white picket fence. They came reluctantly, fearfully, but they came. There were men among them, stooped and bent, their clothes ragged, their eyes feral. There were animals that were almost men, with bloated heads and long thin arms that hung below their knees. The apprentices were urging them on, David among them. The wind howled louder, transformed into an unrelenting battering ram that assaulted all four sides of the property. Not a whisper of a breeze reached Woolerey, however. The fence line was holding.

Goaded by Antipas, one of the creatures tried to rip the gate off its hinges. It recoiled in horror, bloody stumps held out where its hands used to be. The wind increased its ferocity, moaning as it struggled to beat down the fence. Little by little it drained power out of the defenses. For the first time Woolerey had to admit that he might lose after all. The beasts moved closer, anticipating a breakthrough. Antipas advanced and jammed his staff through the rails of the gate. The gate screamed as if it were alive, and the whole fence trembled. Black smoke poured from the point of contact. The wind sucked up the smoke and whirled it around, making the air foul and hot. The gate began to burn.

With a shout the beasts rushed the fence. They rammed it, they butted it. They pulled it and pushed it, working the posts out of the ground. The angry wind seeped through in tiny jets that stirred the grass and the roses.

Britannia left Woolerey's side, bounding toward the fence with a hiss of rage. She grew to the size of a tiger. She raked the top of the fence with her claws. There were screams of agony from the other side. The beasts gave way wherever she went.

The Twins hurried to the support of their troops. They hacked at Britannia with their staves each time she reached over the fence. She had to content herself with prowling the safe side, snarling at them all, lunging

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for hands that were too slow to withdraw as she approached. But all in vain. The fence line continued to fail. A steady breeze stirred the big cat's fur and rolled on in search of Woolerey.

The Twins called out to him. "Be patient, brother. We'll be with you shortly." Woolerey had to admit that they were not boasting. The first line of defense had failed.

He called Britannia and retreated to the porch. Taunts and jeers followed them. A few minutes later the fence went down. The beasts charged the house triumphantly. It repelled them. A few were killed outright, others lay stunned in the grass. The rest keened like hunting dogs held in check, waiting for the wizards.

Karen held the door open for him. He went in slowly, facing the yard. The beasts trampled his flower beds in glee. They pulled the rose bushes out by the roots and flung them at the house. Woolerey closed the door and locked it from the inside. He and Karen went to the big picture window.

The wizards were out of sight for the moment. Woolerey's attention was drawn by the animals cavorting in his yard, but Karen was looking further out. "There's my mommy," she said, pointing. She jumped and waved excitedly, but settled down after a few seconds. "She doesn't see me." Her voice quavered with repressed tears. Woolerey looked where she pointed, but could see little. Perhaps a car was driving by, or perhaps a street light was shining; he couldn't tell. It didn't matter. No one out there could help. They couldn't even know what was happening.

Something half-human spotted Karen through the window and made a lunge for her, not realizing the glass was there. Karen had Woolerey's ring in her hand and pointed it. The beast howled and ran away, holding its head in both hands as if something inside were trying to get out. Woolerey quickly made her put the ring back in her pocket. "Don't use it until you have to," he said. "They can't get in yet."

She clung to his arm. "I'm scared, Grandpa."

"I know you are, Sweetheart." He bent down and gave her a hug. "But don't you fret. I'm not going to let anyone hurt you."

There was a lull while the wizards conferred. The wind never let up. After flattening the white picket fence, it swirled up to the house, rattling the doors and windows, but it could do no damage there. It whipped and snapped the wizards' robes and drowned out the insane howling of the

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animals prancing around them. Woolerey took Karen by the hand and led her into the living room. "They won the first round," he said, "but they'll find the house a tough nut to crack." He sat her down in the stuffed chair and went back to the window.

He waited for the wizards to advance. When they did they each took a different side of the house. Varan, nearly invisible in the darkness, went to the left. The Twins went to the right. He lost sight of them. Antipas stayed in front, standing in the center of the yard, holding his staff overhead with both hands. He was chanting a spell Woolerey had never heard before. He worried about unwelcome surprises.

Antipas pointed his staff at the house. The wall turned fiery red. Woolerey stood by the window and held his cane tightly. He mumbled an ancient incantation. The tip of his cane trembled. It aimed itself like a dowsing rod through the window at Antipas. Woolerey bent his whole will into it. Antipas took a step back and the wall lost its red color.

Britannia hissed a warning. A green glow painted the wall of the back bedroom. Woolerey whipped his cane over to oppose it. The glow vanished, but behind him, the front window turned red again. As he faced the front, he saw that the kitchen wall was bathed in green. In the living room a colorless shimmer of energy obscured the far wall. They were attacking all four sides, and they were succeeding easily. He opposed them each in turn, but each made gains whenever his force was directed elsewhere. Karen sensed the danger and pulled the stuffed chair in front of the sofa to make herself a little fort. "Hide, Grandpa."

Woolerey's cane bucked and jolted as he turned from wall to wall. His arms grew weary and he couldn't keep the cane up. Soon he would be too dizzy to stand. All the outside walls, the doors, even the windows took on the hues of their attackers. He placed himself in the center of the living room where he could watch over Karen, and rested.

"What's happening, Grandpa?"

"They're breaking down the walls. You stay right where you are, okay?"

"Okay."

He unscrewed the top of his cane and withdrew a long thin wand of crystal and silver. It fluoresced with the soft blue of a morning sky, and the warring colors around it did not affect it. Once, two millennia ago, he

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controlled its power for one full minute. That effort sealed the Academy in its trap, but it nearly killed him in the bargain. He sat down on the sofa and intoned again the chant used only once. Power hummed in the Scepter, resonated in his bones, and grew stronger as he chanted. He didn't have much strength left in his ancient hands, he knew that perfectly well, but the slightest control, a few scant seconds, might be enough.

There was a stunning BANG on the front wall. Then another, and another, BANG, BANG. The front door was hit, BANG, and it buckled under the impact. There was a smell of sulfur in the air. Another blow struck, BANG, splintering the inside of the kitchen wall. The same spot was hit again, and a rock twice the size of a man's head pounded through and hit the back wall where it fell to the floor with a muffled thud, smoking. The kitchen tile melted beneath it. Wind, wild and angry, whistled through the hole and became a cyclone, clutching at everything. Books flew from shelves, lamps toppled, and cabinet doors flew open, flapping like loose shutters. Pots and pans spilled onto the floor. China crashed and scattered everywhere.

Karen screamed and pointed at the picture window. It had shattered and glass was lying everywhere. Twisted, ugly faces stared at her hungrily. "They're coming in, Grandpa!" She jumped up and aimed the ring at the creatures. The leaders screamed and halted just inside the house. Karen ducked back down inside her fort.

Woolerey interrupted the chant long enough to wave his free hand at the creatures. Blue light flung them away like dolls. Two of them fell inside the house; the rest were blown outside into the yard. He worried about the ones inside being too close to Karen so he moved to finish them. He dipped a finger at the first. It cried out piteously and died. He pointed at the second, but saw it was David, hurt and barely conscious. Woolerey raised his hand, but did not strike.

He turned away, again facing Varan's wall, but the delay had cost him too much time. The wall rippled like a flag in a breeze. With a final heave it burst inward. It shattered into a thousand spinning fragments that struck everything in the room with a sound like bullets pinging. The concussion staggered him and drove him back, but the Scepter protected him from the splinters. Where Karen had been he could see nothing.

Varan grasped a splintered two-by-four that still pointed roofward and

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pulled himself up into the house. Desperately Woolerey aimed the tip of the Scepter at him. Varan moved to ward off the blow. His staff caught the surging blue light of the Scepter as if it had hands, and then the two powers wrestled. The Scepter was the greater magic, but Woolerey was too old and the chant was still not completed. He could not hold the Scepter long enough to win.

Varan must have known that Woolerey was weakening, but instead of bearing down to end the fight, he eased back. He withdrew his staff until it was touching him from foot to chest. Blue light licked his fingers. Suddenly he threw his staff away, abandoning his weapon and his protection, abandoning himself to the power he had made. His body glowed in the Scepter's beam, changing him from black to pale blue. His features became visible, a skeletal old man, smiling, eyes huge, his unkempt beard crawling with blue fire. He stretched his arms out wide, accepting the Scepter's energy. It caressed him like an old friend. He dissolved silently into nothingness, the image of his outstretched arms imprinted on Woolerey's retinas.

The roof groaned where it was no longer supported by the outside wall. Plaster fell in huge clumps, driving unbreathable dust into the air. Woolerey searched for Karen in the rubble. He found her between the sofa and the stuffed chair inside her little fort. He couldn't tell how badly she was hurt. There were splinters in her face and arms, and little trickles of blood came from the wounds. At least she was still alive. The roof groaned again, settling. He was tempted to give up for her sake, but he forced himself to think of her as just one little girl on a planet full of little girls. It wasn't easy.

He turned away, looking for Britannia. She was nowhere to be seen. Two fat bodies lay in the doorway with their throats ripped out. Then he saw her in the yard. She was backing away from something. He called to her and she came to him in a rush. The air outside was crimson. Woolerey restarted the incantation. The hum of power made his ears ache. Antipas walked into view a few paces from the wrecked, sagging doorway. Woolerey's arm throbbed; the Scepter bucked in his grip. Antipas entered the house. He stared greedily at the Scepter.

"Yield it, brother," Antipas said.

"No," Woolerey answered.

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Antipas cursed him. He threw a bolt of red lightning from his staff. Woolerey parried it, or rather the Scepter did so for him. The lightning bounced away and scorched the wall behind him. Woolerey pointed the Scepter unsteadily. The space between the two wizards turned into a blazing battleground of red and blue energy. But Woolerey was overmatched. He gave ground. His will, his whole being, were locked to the Scepter. He had nothing to spare, nothing with which to continue his chant, nothing with which to summon more power. He couldn't have held more power anyway. He retreated.

Antipas laughed. He forced Woolerey back against the kitchen wall and pinned him there. He was too strong. Woolerey was too old.

The Scepter's blue glow was a slowly shrinking cocoon that touched every part of Woolerey's body. Never before had he been in contact with so much raw power. Woolerey sensed something he had never guessed in two thousand years. In the Scepter's core lay an empty bubble, a hollowness that ached to be filled. From that ache came a call to Woolerey to abandon himself, to make a transformation greater than any alchemy, a transformation of life into pure power. Woolerey held his own death in his hands; death for himself, death for Antipas, death for the Twins. He need only surrender to that death and the fight would be over.

He couldn't do it. He couldn't let go of his self.

A form, a shadow, crept beneath the battle, inching her way forward. Neither Woolerey nor Antipas saw her. The hair on her back blackened from the heat of the energies above her. She crept to within a foot of the long red robe. Then she sprang for the wizard, a cat becoming a tiger.

Antipas clutched at his throat. He lost his grip on his staff which whipped through the air like the end of a loose hose. Everything touched by the red power exploded. The sagging roof erupted up and out, and fell onto the grass and the flower beds in a hail of broken beams and twisted, charred shingles. The kitchen wall blew outward and fell, smoldering, into the yard. The bedroom wall vanished, and then the bedroom itself disappeared.

The power coursing through the Scepter, suddenly unopposed, shot out in its own destructive beam. It played over the antagonists in the doorway. Antipas flickered for an instant, still struggling with the shape at his throat, and then both he and Britannia evaporated in blue fire and were gone.

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The red power that Antipas had summoned up ceased to exist. Into its vacuum the other power thundered. Windows vanished. All the walls still standing burst and blew away. The stove and refrigerator crumpled like aluminum cans. The Scepter jerked out of Woolerey's hand with such violence it broke his wrist and twisted his arm half out of its socket. He fell to the floor in agony, and for a moment he forgot where he was and what he was doing.

Night reclaimed the battleground. Night, and silence. Woolerey tried to get back up. He had to find the Scepter before someone else did. He grasped at the wreckage for something to pull himself up by. Everything he touched turned to ashes. There was nothing solid anywhere. Eventually he got to his knees. He sat back on his haunches, exhausted.

Nothing higher than three feet remained standing. The house was open to the sky, and the walls were gone. Everything was charred black. Wisps of smoke rose from smoldering pieces of wood, and little flames danced on the remains of his furniture. Blackened corpses lay on the threshold and in the yard. Out in the street, people were getting up off the pavement. Karen's mother was there, looking dazed and frightened. Two policemen held her back. It came to him slowly that his house and his yard were no longer cut off from the familiar Earth. There were innocent bystanders to worry about now.

Something moved in the living room. One of the Twins? Whoever it was, he rolled over with a groan. Not a wizard then. Britannia? No — she was gone. Karen?

He forced himself to his feet. His broken wrist was numb and his legs were weak from shock. He shuffled through the hot debris, searching for the Scepter. He found Antipas's burned out staff. It crumbled into ashes at the touch of his foot.

The person by the wall stirred again. Woolerey watched him stand. His eye caught something else, faintly blue. It lay between him and the other survivor. He limped toward it. The other heard him coming. "Who is it?" he begged. Woolerey recognized David's voice.

"Who is it?" David asked again, backing away blindly in the darkness. Woolerey didn't answer until he reached the spot where he had seen the light. It was the Scepter, unscathed, fluorescing dimly with a residue of

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power. He bent down painfully and picked it up with his left hand. The light ran up his arm and illuminated his face.

David stopped backing away. "Is it over?"

Woolerey shook his head. "Not yet."

The sound of static electricity crackled behind him. Two green smudges spiraled out of the night. The Twins. It would take them a few seconds to arrive. Woolerey intoned the words of power. David cowered.

Woolerey went to the sofa where he had last seen Karen. She was not moving. There was an ugly black burn on her hand where she had clutched the ring too long. He put it in her pocket. He tried to wipe some of the blood off her cheek. When she felt his hand on her face she opened her eyes.

"Stay here," he said. "There's still more to do."

He faced the Twins, and let himself settle down onto the ash-covered floor. He was too weak now to stand. Power weighed the Scepter down between his legs as if the mass of the Earth were being sucked into it. He tried to point it at the two green shadows, but it was too heavy to lift with his one uninjured hand. He tried again. It came up an inch, two inches. The tip dropped back down, touching the floor. He could see the Twins' eyes now — and they could see his.

"David," he said. "Come over here."

"What for?" David asked suspiciously.

Woolerey took a deep breath. "I need your help, David. I can't finish this alone."

David looked at him queerly. "Are you hurt?"

"Yes, I'm hurt. And I'm old. And I need you." He turned just enough to see the battered young man clearly. "Are you coming?"

David watched the Twins coalescing. Two heartbeats passed.

"Antipas is dead," Woolerey said. "Varan is gone. Only these two remain."

David shuffled closer on hands and knees. "What do I do?"

"Take my arm. Aim the point of the Scepter at them."

David grasped Woolerey's arm and lifted. The tip rose halfway between the floor and waist level. In another second the Twins were fully present.

"We're surprised anyone survived," Jayrud said. "We only just escaped in time ourselves."

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"In time," Jayrina said, and laughed.

"It looked like all hell was breaking loose," Jayrud said.

Woolerey grimaced. Even speaking was difficult. "Varan is gone," he said. "Antipas is gone too."

The Twins eyed the luminous tip of the Scepter. "Who is that with you?" they asked. David hid his face behind Woolerey's back. "Can it be your familiar? It's a shape we didn't know she had."

"It's someone who changed allegiance," Woolerey said. "There's still time for you to do the same. Or do you still intend to be unbound?"

The Twins turned their heads to look at one another, a silent question passing between them. When they returned their gaze to Woolerey, they both said, "Unbound, old man." They dipped their staves forward. Green light spread like goo toward Woolerey.

"Lift, David." But David had other ideas. He lunged for the Scepter and tried to wrestle it out of Woolerey's hand. He almost had it when Karen pointed her ring at him. He rolled away, screaming, until he bumped into a beam from the roof.

Woolerey retreated from the Twins. The floor was bathed in blue light where the Scepter pointed down. Karen came to him, still bleeding from one cheek. "I knew he'd do that," she said. She took Woolerey's hand in both of hers. Their spines tingled with electricity as green light licked their hair.

The Scepter rose. A blue shield formed around Woolerey and Karen. Woolerey tried to expand it, but he could not. The Twins pushed down on the shield, compressing it. The green power was within inches of Karen's head.

Time slowed. The Twins pressed down. There was no air for Woolerey to sing the chant with, no chance to bring more power into play. The hollow center of the Scepter called to him. He tried to ignore it. Beside him Karen quavered, "Grandpa?" In her voice was the pain and strain of arm muscles on the verge of giving out, the terror of a small body under the pressing weight of the Twins, the frailness of a little girl in a big fight. Woolerey's own body whimpered, against his will, as that same weight pressed down on his broken wrist, an agony almost beyond bearing.

To go on struggling for life now would be to lose the fight. Karen would lose too, crushed into the floor beside him. The Twins would take

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the Scepter, and there would be no one to check them or resist them, ever.

The Scepter called like a lover on a seaside cliff at first sight of his sail.

If he gave in, there would be no more children or grandchildren. He would never see Karen grow up, never know her children or her children's children. It would be the end of people and of knowing.

Either way he must die. Faced with a choice that was no choice, he gave himself up to the Scepter.

His heartbeat dropped almost to nothing. His breathing stopped. He was partly in his body, and partly in the Scepter. The crystal rod strained in his grip, but he willed it to be still. Karen helped him keep it pointed up. Power lanced out, slicing through the murky green, gaining momentum, using Woolerey's very life as its source, feeding off his flesh and blood. The Twins could not match such a surge, could not block or contain it. Woolerey saw fear fill their eyes as they realized what was happening.

"I yield," Jayrud cried, falling back a step. Karen tried to bring the Scepter down, but it was too late. A wave of blue light rose over Jayrud and, descending, pounded him into the floor. There was nothing left of him but a puddle.

Jayrina looked at the spot where her brother had stood, her eyes big with shock. The blue wave rose all around her, a swirl of power that spun her, twisted her, and swept her away, helpless, into nothingness. There was a shuddering clap of thunder and then everything was quiet.

Karen let Woolerey's arm fall.

The old man sat still for many seconds and let the silence seep into him. His breath came back to him like a whisper. He was so weak he knew he had only minutes left. Karen's touch on his arm made him look up.

"Is it over now?" she asked. Woolerey took her arms to keep her from trembling. She would cry very soon now, once she realized she was safe.

"Yes, it's over," Woolerey said. "There are no more wizards to trouble the world."

"There's still you," she said.

He smiled. "The last wizard retires."

She looked at him as if she hadn't seen him for a long time. "When Mr. Johnson retired, he went to Florida. You aren't going to Florida, are you, Grandpa?"

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Woolerey surveyed the smoking devastation all around him, lit now by the flashing lights of police cars and fire trucks. "No," he said. "Not Florida."

She removed the ring from her finger and pondered it briefly. Her mother was stepping warily into the spoiled yard, despite a policeman who tried to hold her back. Karen put the ring into Woolerey's hand. "You're a wise child," he told her. He kissed her on the forehead. "But I want you to do something for me." He put the ring on her palm. She stared at it, puzzled, and while her attention was diverted Woolerey made a sign with his one good hand. The ring disappeared.

"It will be there if you ever truly need it," he said.

She gave him a big hug which caught him off guard and nearly toppled him over. "You go to your mother now," he said.

"Good-bye, Grandpa." She stumbled away, crying finally, kicking up soot as she went.

"Good-bye, Karen."

He couldn't watch her all the way. His chin sank to his chest, and he saw only the Scepter. It was, for him, a deep pool of water into which he sank.

He heard David get to his knees and scramble over. "Am I your apprentice now?" David asked.

Woolerey could not answer.

David pushed Woolerey's shoulder. The old man's body, just a husk now, fell onto its back. Cautiously David removed the Scepter from the dead fingers. He stood up and had a good look around. He waved the Scepter experimentally, but nothing happened. As he searched for some hidden button or stub, the last hint of blue faded away.

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

A Fall of Stardust, by various, Green Man Press, 1999; $12.95

IN THE summer of 1998, Karen Shaffer, wife of well-known illustrator Charles Vess, was involved in a single-car accident in which she sustained severe spinal cord injuries. Her ongoing rehabilitation, considering the severity of those injuries, has been remarkable, but the resulting medical bills are staggering. To help offset these expenses, those close to Karen and Charles have been organizing fund-raising efforts on their behalf, ranging from benefit concerts to donations of artwork and other rare materials which have subsequently been auctioned off.

A Fall of Stardust is another benefit project, this time closely related to the gorgeous illustrated novel *Stardust* that Vess and Neil Gaiman produced for DC Comics in 1998, with a prose-only version also released this past February from Spike/Avon Books credited to only Gaiman.

There are twenty-eight full-color plates and one black-and-white done by some of the best artists in the comic and fine arts fields, each printed on good stock and suitable for framing. Vess is represented, of course, but there are also paintings by Brian Froud, Michael Kaluta, Dave McKean, Terry Moore, Lisa Snellings, Michael Zulli, Terri Windling, and many others.

Also included are a pair of prose chapbooks, illustrated by Vess: a prequel to the *Stardust* novel by Gaiman, paired up with a selection of some of his quirky verse, and "The Duke of Wellington Misplaces His Horse" by Susanna Clarke. Clarke's is a wonderfully amusing piece about a pompous man getting his comeuppance. Gaiman's offering is a tender look at a young girl's coming-of-age that plays with the old corvid rhyme, "One for sorrow,

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two for joy..." For all its brevity, it might well be my favorite Gaiman story to date.

Taken all together, this is a fabulous package, offered at a reasonable price, with all the profits going to a good cause. What more could you ask for?

Anyone who wishes to make a contribution to the fund can contact: Karen Shaffer Good Goddess Recovery Fund, c/o Green Man Press, 152 East Main St., Abingdon, VA 24210.

Dark Cities Underground, by Lisa Goldstein, Tor Books, June, 1999; $22.95

I've long been a fan of Lisa Goldstein's work, not simply because I'm guaranteed a well-written novel with interesting, believable — if often offbeat — characters, but because I never know where the story will lead me. This time out she's giving us her own take on themes explored previously in books such as Jonathan Carroll's *The Land of Laughs* and William Browning Spencer's *Zod Wallop* — the sorts of novels wherein the classic children's book proves to be more than simply words on paper. Add in a dash of Tim Powers' ability to find conspiracies in common history, and Jim Blaylock's charming absurdities, and you have all the touchstones you need to describe *Dark Cities Underground*.

In Goldstein's exploration of the theme, a young journalist named Ruth Barry has gotten a book contract to write about Jerry Jones, better known by millions of readers as the central character of *The Adventures of Jeremy in Neverwas*, a series of classic children's books written by his mother. But what Barry doesn't know — and Jones doesn't remember — is that Jones's mother didn't make up the fantastic adventures she wrote about; she merely transcribed events that Jones told her actually happened to him.

Barry and Jones first meet when Barry arrives at his house to interview him. They get off on the wrong foot because Jones refuses to talk about his mother, or the Jeremy books, but he finally relents. And the next thing we know, as though simply talking about those old days has reawakened them, the pair are thrust into hair-raising adventures straight out of the pages of those children's books.

From the BART system in San Francisco to the London underground, from women made of rain and odder creatures still to strange

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conspiracies that tie together all the underground subways of the world, we follow Barry and Jones on a delightful excursion that's equal parts charming and harrowing. And as Philip José Farmer did when he connected all the pulp heroes of the earlier part of this century, Goldstein finds a way to connect many of the classics of children's literature: *Alice in Wonderland, Peter Pan, The Wind in the Willows*, and even *The Hobbit*.

It all makes for a thoroughly enjoyable book

The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon, by Stephen King, Scribner, April 1999; $16.95

It's a sure sign of the end-of-the-millennium apocalypse: Stephen King has turned in a short book.

Okay, I'm joking. But it is a rarity for the writer who is usually a man of many words.

To be honest, when I first heard about this new novel, I wasn't particularly taken with the premise: a young girl is lost in the Maine woods and keeps her spirits up by listening to baseball games on her Walkman, and by imagining the presence of baseball player Tom Gordon with her in the forest. I'm not a huge fan of baseball, to begin with (sacrilege, I'm sure, to many of the readers of this column, not to mention King himself), and the premise sounded too narrowly focused, reminding me of my least favorite King novel, *Gerald's Game*, all of which took place in a single room.

But the thing about King is that he's so often able to pull off what he shouldn't be able to, and these less supernatural-based novels (I put *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon* in the same thematic class as, say, *Dolores Claiborne*) are often the books of his I like most. It's because he's always so good with characterization and in these, where we don't have the bogeymen and monsters sharing page space, there seems to be that much more room to bring the characters more fully to life.

So I started the book with reservations, but soon forgot them. Nine-year-old Trisha McFarland's ordeal in the forest makes for a riveting read, especially when you know how easy it is to get turned around in the bush and become lost. Trust me, the way it happens to Trisha is *highly* believable. And once we're lost in the woods with her, it's claustrophobic at times, certainly, but hardly as narrowly focused as I was afraid it might be.

As for the baseball aspect of the book, it's important, certainly, but

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you don't have to be a fan to appreciate it. My only real quibble is Trisha's age. King puts her at nine, but she seemed older to me — eleven or twelve. But I don't have kids, so what do I know?

The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon stands right up there with the best work that King's produced, and that's very fine work indeed. In Trisha, he has created a wonderfully believable little girl. She might be scared and suffering from hunger, incessant bug bites, and all the other perils of the deep bush, but she has a heart as big as all of Maine. And it's how King portrays that heart — her despair, yes, but also her determination to beat the immense odds set against her — that makes this such an outstanding novel.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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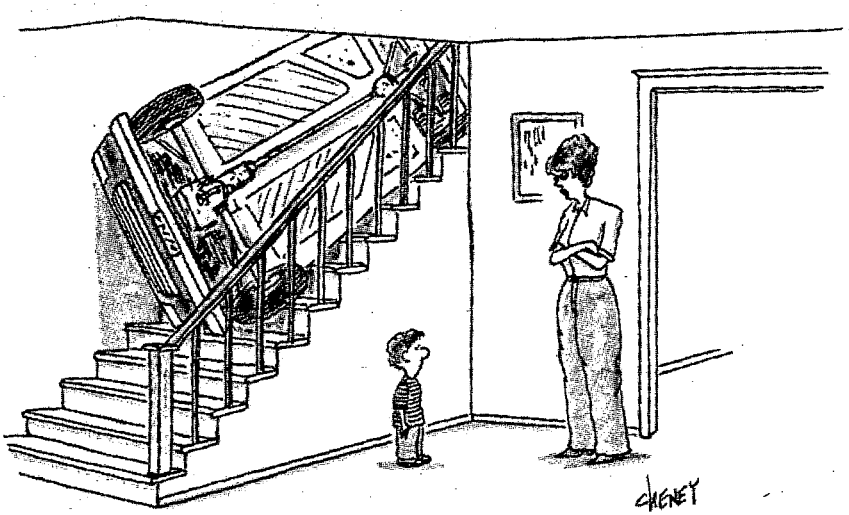

"I thought we already had this discussion about leaving things on the stairs."

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Books

ELIZABETH HAND

A Good Old-Fashioned Future, stories by Bruce Sterling, Bantam, $6.99

Seven for the Apocalypse, by Kit Reed, Wesleyan University Press/University Press of New England, $40 hb, $16.95 pb

STILL MORE STORIES FOR BOYS

I WAS almost halfway through Bruce Sterling's new and wonderfully entertaining collection, before it finally dawned on me.

Who the hell does this remind me of? The usual suspects ticked through my mind: William Gibson, Sterling's sometime collaborator, brooding Prince Hamlet to Sterling's mordantly witty Richard III;[1] Jack Womack, that cheery historian of bleak realpolitik dissolution and despair (who with *Let's Put the Future behind Us* has already come up the best title for a book of this sort); Samuel R. Delany, the spiritual godfather of Gibson and Sterling and all their ilk, who with their youth (alas! graying somewhat now) and attitudinal punk posturing (to say nothing of the dogma) might as well have stepped from the pages of one of his mid-career classics: *Trouble on Triton*, or *Dhalgren*.

But no, that wasn't quite it, either. I frowned and went on reading Sterling's collection, a longish story called "The Littlest Jackal."

> "Ex-Soviet hash isn't really very good," sniffed Aino. "They don't know how to do it right...I don't like to sell hash. But if you sell people drugs, then they respect you. They won't talk about you when cops come. I hate cops. Cops are fascist torturers. They should all be shot. Do you need the car, Raf?"
>
> "Take the car," Raf said.

[1]Note to overly literal readers: Bruce Sterling is not a hunchback.

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Aino fetched her purse and left the safehouse.

"Interesting girl," commented Starlitz in the sudden empty silence. "Never heard of any Finn terror groups before. Germans, French, Irish, Basques, Croats, Italians. Never Finns, though."

"They're a bit behind the times in this corner of Europe. She's one of the new breed. Very brave. Very determined. It's a hard life for terrorist women." Raf carefully sugared his coffee. "Women never get proper credit. Women kidnap ministers, women blow up trains—women do very well at the work. But no one calls them 'armed revolutionaries.'"

Bingo! I turned and pulled a moldering book from the shelf, opened it and began to read —

> There is an ice wagon with a couple of horses hitched to it standing in front of a store, and when he sees the horses Rusty Charley seems to get a big idea. He stops and looks the horses over very carefully, although as far as I can see they are nothing but horses, and big and fat, and sleepy-looking horses, at that. Finally Rusty Charley says to me like this:
>
> "When I am a young guy," he says, "I am a very good puncher with my right hand, and often I hit a horse on the skull with my fist and knock it down. I wonder," he says, "if I lose my punch. The last copper I hit back there gets up twice on me."
>
> Then he steps up to one of the ice-wagon horses and hauls off and biffs it right between the eyes with a right-hand smack that does not travel more than four inches, and down goes old Mister Horse to his knees looking very much surprised.

This is from a story called "Blood Pressure," which is from a collection called *Guys and Dolls*, which if you have studied your American Popular Literature of the Twentieth Century, or seen a movie with a singer called Frank Sinatra in it, or maybe a high school play, you will know is by a guy named Damon Runyon. Excitedly I turned back to Sterling and a discussion between Leggy Starlitz and Aino the girl terrorist, about a series of Finnish children's books in the Smurf/Moomin mold —

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"Speffy the Nerkulen." Aino frowned. "That isn't even a proper Finnish name. It isn't Swedish either. Not even Åland Swedish."

Starlitz turned off the shortwave, which was detailing Finnish agricultural production. "She imagined Speffy, that's all. Speffy the Nerkulen just popped out of her little gray head. But Speffy the Nerkulen sure moves major product in Hokkaido."

Aino riffled the pages of the paperback. "I could make a book like this. She wrote this book fifty years ago. She was my age when she wrote and drew this book. I could do this myself."

"Why do you say that?"

She looked up. "Because I could, I know I could. I can draw. I can tell stories. I'm always telling stories to people at the bar. Once I did a band poster."

"That's swell. How'd you like to come along with me and brace up the little old lady? I need a Finnish translator, and a former Froofy fan would be great. Besides, she can give you helpful tips on kid-lit."

Aino looked at him, surprised. Slowly, she frowned. "What are you saying? I'm a revolutionary soldier. You should respect my political commitment. You wouldn't talk to me that way if I was a twenty-year-old boy."

Much is made of the concept of world-building in science fiction, a notion that goes something like this: If you build it, they will read. I.e., if you carefully calculate the ratio of trees to microchips, guns to butter, oxygen to radon, aliens to androids, computers, AIs, humans and such, thereby creating the literary equivalent of a set of architectural blueprints for an imagined future — well then, the resulting world-product will serve as template for that willing suspension of disbelief necessary for science fiction. Most science fiction is configured this way. Think of *Dune*, *Foundation*, Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars* trilogy.[2] It's fiction as architecture, blissfully free of that most traditional element of literature, character development.

And yet there is another stream of consciousness available to writers, and for all the hi-tech jargon

[2]There's a funny ironical justice to this, since a long time ago in a magazine far, far away, Mister Sterling (he's the one in the dark glasses) gave Mister Robinson (he's the one waving a copy of *David Copperfield*) a hard time in something then called The Cyberpunk-Humanist debate. But I won't go into that here.

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and rape and pillage of the global village, Sterling plunges right into it. He's a master of contemporary cultural dissociation, often played for laughs. His plots are succinct and darkly funny, as in "Sacred Cow," where India becomes a world superpower by default — everyone else has died of mad cow disease, but Hindus don't eat beef, natch. Yet more than anything else, the tales in *A Good Old-Fashioned Future* are purposefully, almost deliriously, character-driven. And because we believe in them, the world he weaves around people like Leggy Starlitz and Deep Eddy Dertouzas and Pete the City Spider is utterly believable, a burned-out near-future Earth populated by polyglot gangsters and optimistic opportunists who might have stepped through the wrong manhole in Runyon's Manhattan and come out in Sterling's outer Mongolia: a bit nonplused, perhaps, to find themselves gazing into a nuclear test cavity now fizzing with organically reproducing robots, but still walking the walk and talking the talk.

"Saaaaa..." riposted Mr. Inoue, patting the plasticized top of his shaven head. "The electroneural stabilizers of His Holiness the Master. They will soon be in mass production at our Fuji fortress."

"You got like a kids' version of those, right?" said Starlitz.

"Of course. His Holiness the Master has many children."

"So have you ever considered, like, a pop commercial version of those gizmos? Like with maybe a fully licensed cartoon character?"

Mr. Inoue blinked. "I was led to understand that Mister Khoklov's associates could supply us with military helicopters."

"The son of a bitch is on about the helicopters again," Starlitz explained in Russian.

Sterling is a master of character-through-dialogue. He still hasn't matched the best example of this, from Runyon's contemporary Ring Lardner —

"Are we lost, Daddy?" I asked tenderly.

"Shut up," he explained.

— but he comes pretty close, in lines like

"'Life is very exciting today,' said Schreck with a smirk."

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There are seven stories in *A Good Old-Fashioned Future*, and they are all pretty wonderful. Even the weakest of the lot, "Big Jelly" (a collaboration with Rudy Rucker), is still fun, a big pink pop-bubble of a tale about artificial floating jellyfish that begs to be illustrated by William Joyce, of *A Day with Wilbur Robinson* fame. "Taklamakan," the best (and most recent, to judge from its magazine pub date) work, builds upon previous stories and characters to reach a peak of hallucinatory wonder and terror, as the urban climber Pete (he of the City Spiders) finds himself in a garishly desolate part of the central Asian desert, confronting "an entire new means of industrial production" of "revolutionary weirdness." The means of production harks back to John Varley's "In the Hall of the Martian Kings," among others. But Sterling's presentation is both more terrifying and ultimately more believable than anything I've read before. The reason is not his descriptions of the bio-engineered, self-replicating creatures, although those descriptions are marvelous. Even in "Taklamakan," here at the end of all things, the secret of Sterling's success lies in his characterizations — all those beautifully drawn losers and dreamers, spooks and mooks who wouldn't be out of place in a Scorsese film, if only they'd straighten their clothes and remember to smile at the boss. *A Good Old-Fashioned Future* is great fun, but it's also a great book, a literary dark horse if ever there was one. If science fiction were the last race at Belmont, I'd put all my money on Bruce Sterling to win.

Like Sterling's collection, Kit Reed's *Seven for the Apocalypse* depicts a fractured, fractal world, a place you recognize but not somewhere you'd want to visit; and then you think, Oops, here I am. Not all the stories here are genre works. The best one, "Voyager," is not. It is a beautiful, tragic piece about a man living with the emotional and physical fallout of his wife's Alzheimer's disease; in its concision, and the heartbreakingly commonplace rendering of mingled love and despair, "Voyager" brings to mind John Bayley's *Elegy for Iris*.

> You look up one day to discover the person that you think you know is no longer that person; she's drifting out to sea, drawn by the tides into an unknown ocean while you stand, helplessly ranting, as she bobs away.

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The other stories in Reed's collection, while neatly done, never quite achieve the emotional resonance of "Voyager." "On the Penal Colony" comes closest, with its deft, dark depiction of Old Arkham Village, a New England tourist trap in the Old Sturbridge Village mode, whose ersatz colonials churning butter and sweating over a blacksmith's forge are actually prisoners, their ankle monitors hidden beneath their costumes. It's Shirley Jackson updated for the millennium, and no mean feat. The collection's centerpiece, the short novel "Little Sisters of the Apocalypse," is ambitious and strobe-lit with streaks of brilliant writing. Within an affluent island enclave straight out of J. G. Ballard, a number of women await the return of their men, five years absent now in a war that may be nothing more than a rumor, or a game, or an excuse to get away from their wives. But the men are returning; their trajectory is paralleled by an attack by the Outlaws, the displaced people who once lived on the island, and the rumbling motors of the titular religious order, nuns led by Sister Trinitas, whose own name is an acronym for the story's more transcendental concerns —

As Mary Alice Warner she was only a woman, designed for a limited role in the movie of life. As Trinitas, she's not there yet, but she's closer.

In transit, **Trini thinks.** ***We are all in transit.***

The straightforward narrative of "Little Sisters" is broken by snippets of what seem to be notes from the author, musings on Reed's own father, a submarine commander missing in action, and her mother's slow, agonizing death from Alzheimer's. These notes, brief as they are, are ultimately more affecting than the story, which gets blindsided by its own ambition and too many narrative threads.

But Reed has a mean way with aphorisms ("When the world ends, the last person standing will be a woman"), and enough heart that her story manages to be moving despite its technical flaws. The collection's last tale, a trope on the classic fairy tale "The Juniper Tree" called "The Singing Marine," is black and nightmarish and eerily satisfying, just like the original. It leaves the reader thirsty for more, which is a good way, maybe the best way, to end any book.

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"What's the big rush?"

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Four years ago, this trio gave us "The True History of the End of the World." Since then, JL has published novels like Girl in Landscape *and most recently* Motherless Brooklyn, *JK wrote* Corrupting Dr. Nice *and toils away now on* Soft Upset, *and JPK won a Hugo Award for "Think Like a Dinosaur" and used said story as the title tale in his recent collection.*

Readers of gentle sensibility might find the name borne by the aliens in this impressive novella a bit coarse, but calling them "nosegays" just doesn't seem apt...

Ninety Percent of Everything

By Jonathan Lethem, James Patrick Kelly, and John Kessel

THE PIX ON MY DESK SAID, "There's an avatar on the line for you, Liz. Ramsdel Wetherall, looking for an appointment."

Understand that I was as amazed by this as if it had said "Bela Lugosi" or "William the Conqueror." The idea that Ramsdel Wetherall would want to talk to me was that far-fetched. But my pix couldn't be wrong.

"Put him off. I'll take the meeting in eight...no, ten minutes." I needed time to see what I could learn about the reclusive mogul's latest hijinks.

Then I'd decide if I wanted to let him hijink me.

ProfitWeek called Wetherall's acquisition of seventy percent of the island nation of Grenada the machinations of an eccentric genius.

On Mother's Day, a panel of experts on *NewsMelt* debated Wetherall's new infodump about management by avatar. They gave it a mixed review.

A transcript from *America, America* hypothesized that the sixth

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richest man in the world had gone into hiding because he'd come down with an exotic disease, contracted from one or more of his myriad sexual partners.

No, said *Channel Lore,* the shitdogs had taken over his mind by infiltrating his avatars.

Hemisphere Confidential Report had pix of Wetherall indulging his hobby in the smart lasso competition at the sixteenth annual Wyoming Tech Rodeo. He placed second.

And just last week *Eye* had interviewed several astonishingly attractive women in whom Wetherall avatars had expressed a romantic interest. His attorneys had asked them to sign pre-introduction agreements, which prohibited disclosure of any personal encounter with Wetherall, should they ever have one. None of them had. Or so they said.

The search had turned up about what I'd expected: too much speculation and not enough facts. And my appointment was in two minutes.

Although I'd never actually interacted with any of Wetherall's avatars, I'd seen them before. They gazed serenely from pixes across his financial empire. From time to time they gave interviews that were lighter than air. Personally, I found avatars slick and flat as trademarks; whenever I met with one I felt as if I were chatting up Betty Crocker or Bill Gates. But still, *Ramsdel Wetherall.* I took the call.

The avatar that filled the screen was roundish and unthreatening. It had short blond hair, slightly tanned smooth skin, and a not very distinct chin. It might have been the face of a man in his twenties — or a fifty-year-old who had never sweated a mortgage payment. "Professor Cobble?"

"Call me Liz," I said.

"I'm Ramsdel Wetherall." It smiled as if it'd been waiting all its life to meet me.

I wanted to say *No, you're not!*

It was what I liked least about avatars: they acted as if they were the people they represented. Ninety-five percent of the time they operated on their own: buying and selling, lying and telling secrets, flattering and insulting. A busy billionaire like Wetherall could seem to be in two, three, or eleven places at once. The catch was that from time to time the original checked in from afar, and acted and spoke through his digital

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agent. The real Wetherall might be looking at me through those vapid eyes.

Possible but not probable.

"How can I help you?" I said.

There were several seconds of silence. The avatar's smile got bigger and goofier, as if the sheer joy of seeing me had struck it dumb.

"Was there something?" I said.

"Would you mind stepping to the window?" it said. Mystified, I got up and surveyed the campus. A dozen students sunbathed on the quad. Two girls and a dog were playing catch with a Frisbee. A college cop was reading a pix in the shade of the whale statue.

"Do you see the white Jolly Freeze van parked in front of Gould Hall?" said the avatar.

I looked. "Yes." It had no customers, it wasn't lit for business, and it was parked in a handicapped spot. There weren't supposed to be ice cream trucks on campus anyway.

"Can I interest you in a short ride?"

"Does it come with chocolate sprinkles?"

The avatar laughed uproariously. This worried me — it wasn't that funny a joke.

"Turn that smile down, would you?" I said. "It's getting warm in here. So what's this all about?"

The avatar sobered instantly. "Do you believe the shitdogs are intelligent?"

I considered. "If you're asking if they're as smart as human beings, I'd have to say no. Their intelligence is very limited — in a range somewhere between a flounder and a football player."

"What about their vocalizations?"

"They bark. So does Lassie."

"Can I interest you in a short ride?"

"You might, but you haven't. Look, Mr. Wetherall, I've got a Curriculum Committee meeting in five minutes, and a graduate seminar on Primate Sexology in an hour and a half. I've got three thesis advisees backed up outside my door and no time to waste giving you a crash course in exobiology."

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"I just bought ten square miles of salt flats near Stateline, Nevada," Wetherall said.

"I'll be right down."

S WITH RAMSDEL Wetherall, there was too much speculation and too few facts concerning the shitdogs.

To start, we did not know where they came from. Astronomers spotted the ship that brought the shitdogs to us only eighteen hours before it went into orbit. It made just three revolutions of the Earth before splitting into five vehicles that entered the atmosphere and made soft landings in barren salt flats: Chile's Atacama Desert, Australia southeast of Lake Disappointment, the Tsagan Nor basin of the Gobi Desert, the Danakil Plain in Ethiopia. And Stateline, Nevada.

What followed was well documented at all five landing sites. In the United States, fighters from Edwards Air Force Base scrambled and followed the mushroom-shaped lander to touchdown. The Marines arrived shortly after and cordoned off the area. It was fifty-three minutes before the head of the first shitdog poked out of the lander. The Marines assumed that it was coming through some kind of hatch. It wasn't until all five shitdogs had emerged from different exits that the onlookers understood.

The shitdogs were eating their spaceship.

On my way out I ran into Saintjohn Matthewson, the chair of the department.

"Oh, Liz, I'm glad I caught you before the meeting. I'm going to need that justification for the new curriculum by next Tuesday; the provost's breathing down my neck. And the sponsors for the freshman chip implant program want to do some more pix of the experimental classroom to include in their annual corporate report."

"But you said I had another month. Registration hasn't even turned in the enrollment figures."

"I have every confidence in you, Elizabeth. That's why I appointed you." He turned toward the conference room, then paused to admire his

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profile reflected in the window. "By the way, have you noticed the springs are broken on the sofa in the faculty lounge? Almost as if someone's been jumping up and down on it. Have the Building Committee order a new one, and keep the cost down."

"But Saintjohn — "

"Oh, and could you be an angel and get the coffee going before we sit down? I'm afraid this is going to be a long session."

He cruised ahead of me into the room. I stood outside the door for a moment and took a deep breath. Then I turned and went down the stairs and out onto the quad.

The pix of Judy Jolly Freeze on the side of the van waved and chuckled at me. "Please step to the rear door, Liz."

As I walked round to the back, pixes of Charley Cone and Billy Bar called out to me in childish voices, "Buy me! Buy me!" The heavy rear door swung open and I peered into the van. It was dim and cold — not freezing, but chilly enough to make me wish I'd brought a sweater.

"Come in, come in."

As my eyes adjusted to the light, I saw another Wetherall avatar sitting behind a dark wooden desk. A hologram. Unlike the first avatar, this one was wearing data spex. I saw its breath in the cold air — very lifelike. I was impressed. It mumbled something I couldn't quite hear.

"I'm sorry," I said. "What was that?"

Yellow and blue lights ghosted across the lenses of its spex. The avatar frowned. "The P/E is eleven," it said. "I'm not offering a ruble more than twenty-six."

I wondered if Saintjohn was worried yet. Good old Liz was never late for a meeting. "Maybe I'd better come back later."

"Absolutely not. Under no circumstances." It made a swiping motion across the desktop; I doubted it heard me. "I'm not interested in a limited partnership."

If I was looking to get ignored, I could do it as easily in the department as here. "Nice place you've got here," I said. "All you need is a few penguins."

"You're cold?" Its head jerked in surprise. "I find that the body works at peak efficiency when the air temperature is — *É il presso migliore che mi puó fare, Giacomo*? Liz, I'm sorry, you should sit down."

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I settled reluctantly into the plush chair facing the desk. It was as warm as a baby's hand.

"Yes, Murk, I'll get her to sign a release, don't worry. Yes, I agree." It nodded, then its voice dropped a register. "I'm sorry, darling, I'm spread a little thin at the moment. How about eleven? I'll send the limo."

"And all I get is the Jolly Freeze van?" I stood. "Good-bye, Mr. Wetherall. We'll have to not talk again real soon."

The avatar shot out of its chair. "Liz, please." It pulled off the spex and dropped them on the desk. "I'm finished. I promise there will be no further interruptions."

Something about the way the spex bounced against the wood caught my attention. I leaned forward and flicked my forefinger against them. They were real. "You're you, aren't you? Ramsdel Wetherall."

He shrugged. "So they tell me."

I sank back in my chair and chuckled in disbelief. "Aren't you going to make me sign something?"

"That's Murk's obsession — my lawyer." He resumed his seat and did something behind his desk that brought the lights up in the van. For a moment he studied me, as if noticing for the first time that I was a woman. "Should I?"

I may not be Dawn Zoftiggle, but I have my pride. People tell me I'm attractive — smart people, lots of people. On the other hand, I didn't want to give him the impression that I was harboring some romantic design on him. He was Ramsdel Wetherall, after all. "You can't buy the shitdogs," I said, feeling my face flush in the cold air.

"I don't want them." He opened a desk drawer. "I want their jewels."

I couldn't help it; I laughed at him. He laughed with me.

"Ice cream?" he said.

He had a Strawbetty Billy Bar and I had a Chuncolate Charley Cone. The van pulled out of the parking lot and I could hear its synthesizer chirp the first four measures of Scott Joplin's "The Entertainer" over and over again.

"Wait a minute!" I said. "I've got responsibilities. Classes. A meeting to sleep through."

"I love ice cream." Ramsdel Wetherall licked a Strawbetty smear from the corner of his mouth. "It's all I eat these days. Of course, it has to be properly fortified and nutritionally balanced, but that's why I bought

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Jolly Freeze in the first place. You've seen jewels up close, right? At the Stateline site?"

I made myself sit back in the chair. "Sure," I said. "I've even seen them die."

When the shitdogs ate their ship, nobody tried to stop them. At that point it was assumed that they were intelligent. They must have perfectly good, if completely alien, reasons for eating their ship. And of course, there was also the problem of the big stink, which kept even the toughest Marine at a considerable distance.

With the landers gone, we had no clue as to the origin of the shitdogs or the purpose for which they were sent to Earth — other than the beasts themselves.

Most of my colleagues agreed that the shitdogs were beasts; the stubborn few who contended that we hadn't yet recognized their intelligence because it was so different from our own were trapped in a circular argument.

As had been reported any number of times, the shitdogs were not dogs nor were their castings shit — strictly speaking. From direct observation we could see that they were quadrupeds, ranging in hue from powder blue to near indigo. We estimated they weighed almost 3000 kilograms. The largest was fifteen meters in length; none were shorter than fourteen. They functioned without difficulty in Earth's gravity. Their forelegs were long and particularly well suited to digging. Each of their three toes culminated in a razor-sharp crystalline claw, hard enough to scratch diamond. They used their short, powerful rear legs to propel them as they burrowed through salt flats and the piles of their castings. Their faces were composed of a circular maw that could dilate to as much as a meter and a half in diameter. Above that were two external organs the size of tennis balls — eyes, we supposed. An orifice just above the rear legs could iris completely shut, or open to eject a continuous casting approximately twenty-five centimeters in diameter.

We'd been observing shitdog behavior for six years. It consisted mostly of eating and excreting — or intake and output, depending on your model. There was no way to tell whether they were natural or created; it was entirely possible they were some kind of organic mechanisms. In any

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event, they tunneled through the salt flats, gorging on a variety of materials, pushing others aside. When they emerged, usually after a period of eight to ten days, their bodies were grotesquely distended. They lay pulsing and inert in the fierce desert sun, digesting — or processing — for as long as a month. During this time, they periodically vented small amounts of chlorine gas. At the end of this rest cycle, they would crawl to the casting deposit area, climb or tunnel to an appropriate spot, and release their casting in such a way that it coiled into the conical pile.

The odor of a fresh shitdog casting was legendary. The Marines said it was like having barbed wire shoved up your nose. It smelled nothing like the excrement of any animal on Earth; rather it was biting and bleachy, with just a hint of burning brakes. The castings were composed of long chain polymers, which, when first expelled, were one of the most adhesive substances ever known. The castings cured to a rubbery consistency in about a week, after which time their stench was slightly ameliorated. Because the shitdogs returned again and again to the same area to excrete, some suggested that their behavior was purposeful and that their piles were in fact "buildings," constructed in much the same way the ancient Egyptians built the pyramids. I found this theory to be unsupported by the evidence. They had built two roughly conical piles at the Stateline site in the last six years. Each was approximately thirty meters tall; they were now at work on a third. There were similar piles at the other sites.

Public interest in the shitdogs peaked when the first "finished" pile of castings sprouted a two-meter-tall crystalline growth at its peak — the so-called jewels. Outwardly this formation resembled quartz in that it crystallized in the trigonal trapezohedral class of the rhombohedral subsystem of hexagonal symmetry. In their brilliancy, prismatic fire, and color variation, the jewels were nothing like quartz. After long and rancorous debate, a team of scientists tried to retrieve the jewels from the first Ethiopian pile, using lasers manipulated from a helicopter platform. However, as soon as the jewels were taken from the pile, they dissolved into a slurry of shitdog casting. Subsequent attempts, including one in Nevada in which I myself participated, met with similar results. The jewels appeared to be artifacts of the internal chemistry of a finished pile. When you cut them off, they melted, and the pile began to regenerate a new formation. No one knew why.

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We in the shitdog studies community suffered from severe fact deprivation. No shitdog had ever died, and to destroy one for the purposes of dissection was unthinkable. Besides, no one had devised a way to catch a shitdog, much less kill one. Attempts had been made to herd them offsite to field laboratories but, when confronted with manmade obstacles, they emitted a string of their famous barks and retreated. The barking, though loud, did not affect humans, but harmonics above the range of human hearing drove dogs, cats, coyotes — even snakes — into panicked flight.

The Chileans captured a shitdog once, using a flying crane and a specially constructed claw-shaped cage. They lowered the cage onto one that was in a digestive stupor and the claw swung shut. This roused the beast and it began to bark piteously and hurl itself against the cage with a vigor not previously observed in any of its kind. Its actions were so violent that the helicopter was unable to lift the cage off the ground safely. Ten minutes later the shitdog had eaten its way to freedom.

Unfortunately, except for devotees of xenophobic mediants, a scattering of conspiracy-addled loons, and a few scientists like myself, the world had lost interest in the shitdogs. Funding dried up. And why not? Their behavior was inscrutable, their origin a mystery, their nature repellent and their treasure ephemeral.

So why was Ramsdel Wetherall buying salt flats near Stateline, Nevada?

"I take it you've seen the jewels in person?" I said.

"I've been to all five sites."

I whistled. "Even Gobi?"

"I spent an hour last month hovering over Gobi B, close enough to touch the cluster. It has a red..." He shut his eyes and his face softened with pleasure. I've seen men look that way after sex or just before cutting into filet mignon and once in front of the Botticelli frescos at the Louvre, but never remembering a rhombohedron. "They're the most exquisite things I've ever seen," said Ramsdel Wetherall.

Well, at least he was right about that. Then I got suspicious. "Wait a minute. A whole hour? This doesn't have anything to do with Cosmic Lighthouse Keepers?"

He crumpled his ice cream wrapper and tossed it at the trash can on

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the other side of the van. It missed. "You don't believe that the jewels might be windows to other realities and the piles are their batteries?"

"Oh, it's windows and batteries now?" I said. "Last summer Thorp was claiming they were some kind of beacons. Look, a theory explains observations, Mr. Wetherall. Did you observe another reality?"

"Not yet." He gave me a dreamy stare. "My friends call me Wetherall."

VERYONE HAD HEARD of the unfortunate Dr. Blaine Thorp who, after inadvertently getting a smudge of shitdog casting on his right hand, was driven by the smell to perform the self-amputation that almost killed him. Most people assumed that this famous accident occurred during the course of some kind of scientific experiment, a misapprehension that Thorp was happy to encourage. In fact *Doctor* Thorp's only advanced degree was from the Palmer College of Chiropractic in Davenport, Iowa. He was a hobbyist and a crackpot and possibly the worst thing to happen to exobiology since the shitdogs ate their landers. Nevertheless he relentlessly promoted himself as the Ahab of the shitdogs, a man whose unique intimacy with these mysterious creatures had somehow given him true insight into their nature. Or should I say insights; his theories about the shitdogs were as variable as the weather. He announced that the shitdogs do their math in base five. He discerned linguistic symbolism in the paths of their tunneling through the salt flats. He claimed he could tell their emotional state from the color of their castings. And the jewels...they were either talismans of alien enlightenment or religious icons of an interstellar coprophagy cult or sculptures designed to transform human perception or, as of last Thursday, or whenever Wetherall had spoken to Thorp, windows to other realities.

"If you're in this with Thorp, you'd better just pull over and let me out right here," I said. "He's a fake."

"He didn't fake his accident. I shook his hook when we met."

"I'll grant he's missing a hand. For all I know a crocodile bit it off when he was living in Never-Neverland. For that matter, why hasn't he had it replaced?"

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He permitted himself a smile. "Are you always this uncharitable, Liz?"

"About lunatics like Thorp? Yes."

"I take it you've met him then? I found him very...persuasive."

"I debated him on *Channel Lore* two years ago and I still haven't gotten the bad taste out of my mouth." I leaned forward and thrust my right hand at him so that my mother's diamond ring was about ten centimeters from the bridge of his nose. "Look, Wetherall, you want to go on a magical mystery tour? Just stare at this and hold your breath until you pass out. It'll save us both a lot of time and money."

"Money is not a problem, Liz." He gently but firmly pushed my hand away. His skin was cool. "I want to build a house as close as possible to the jewel formation growing on Stateline A. Thorp need not be involved. I need a shitdog expert, Liz — the best there is. I need you."

I tried not to be flattered. "A house! What about the big stink?"

"One man's problem is another man's opportunity," he said. "The stink has its uses."

"Such as?"

He gestured at the inside of the Jolly Freeze truck. "I'm a man who values privacy as much as great beauty."

I let that go, for now. "Okay. You build a mansion with a picture window that overlooks the jewels. You get yourself the best gas mask money can buy. How are you going to keep the shitdogs from eating your basement?"

"Have you ever heard of Nguyen O'Hara?"

At that moment I realized that the van was no longer moving and the music had stopped.

First Thorp, now O'Hara. Was Wetherall attracted to eccentrics? Maybe that's why he had chosen me. Not because of all the time I'd spent studying the shitdogs, but because I'd been raised by eccentrics and had learned to tolerate, if not appreciate, strangeness. But how could he know that?

I hoped he hadn't found my aunts.

"Nguyen O'Hara, the lighter-than-air architect?" I said. "The man who floats slums? Didn't he win the Nobel Prize for Hype?"

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"Mexico City would have sunk into the mire by now if its *colonias* weren't aloft. O'Hara's a genius."

"Putting the poor in balloons works for about eight minutes," I said. "First come the tourists, then the developers, and before long the floating neighborhood is all candle shops and jewelry stands. Meanwhile ninety percent of the families — the ones not finding a niche in T-shirt sales — are forced into some brand new slum that's ten miles from nowhere. Pretty sleazy if you ask me. Anyway, those bubbleshacks are hardly a billionaire's digs."

"He calls it lifthousing," said Wetherall. "And you've never seen Laputa."

"Laputa?"

"O'Hara's private lifthouse. I've arranged for Nguyen himself to give you the tour."

Although I hadn't yet said I was interested in his project, Wetherall had read me like an annual report. There was no way I could turn him down — not when he was offering what could be unprecedented access to the shitdogs. "I could clear some time at the end of the week, maybe Friday afternoon."

"Now," he said.

"Now?" I said. The thought I was even now skipping the Curriculum Committee meeting made me feel strangely giddy.

"I'd want you and Nguyen to meet each other as soon as possible." Wetherall came around the desk. "I'm a great believer in team chemistry, Liz. I need to know whether we can all work together."

"I'm afraid that's out of the question. I have duties, not just to the university and the department, but to my students. I'll have to reschedule my appointments, make arrangements for..."

He patted my shoulder. "That's what avatars are for."

"I don't have an avatar."

"It'll all be taken care of." He ducked past my chair and opened the door of the van; we were parked on a runway. There was a jet with a picture of Judy Jolly Freeze on its tail fin about twenty meters away.

"Wait, I'm not packed — I don't even have a toothbrush."

"Money," he said, "means never having to pack." He produced a cash card from his shirt pocket and offered it to me. "When you get there, you

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can buy whatever you need." He flicked his thumb against the card's edge. "Buy three of whatever you need."

"But where are we going?"

He slipped his arm around me and aimed me at the jet. "Las Vegas," he said.

As we approached The Zones Resort & Casino, I could see Nguyen O'Hara's Laputa hovering some thirty meters over the parking garage. On the roof deck directly beneath it was the truck that served as its ground station. The sides of this vehicle were enormous pix; they cycled through a montage of people of various ages and races and social classes, all pointing up in wonder at the marvelous floating house. Satisfied customers, apparently.

We'd been met at McCarran Airport by yet another Jolly Freeze van. I was caught off guard when Wetherall ushered me to the cab and then climbed beside me and slid behind the wheel. He had scooted the ungainly van through the traffic on the strip like a teamster late for bowling league. Now he maneuvered it effortlessly up the garage's tightly spiraling ramp. We parked near the truck. I craned my neck; Laputa's shadow grew as it descended slowly toward us. I was so busy goggling that I didn't notice the dapper man until his smiling face appeared at the driver's side window. He knocked and then waved.

"Come in, come in!" Wetherall opened the door and slid across the bench seat toward me. "Liz Cobble, meet Nguyen O'Hara."

O'Hara climbed in behind the wheel and shut the door. "My dear Wetherall, you must either turn down the air-conditioning or pass out blankets. Good to have you aboard, Liz." He extended a hand; Wetherall flattened himself against the seat so we could shake. "I'm glad there's finally one sane person on this project."

"Only one?" I said.

"Well, I'm hardly qualified to make representations about my own mental health." He spoke with a slight German accent and tended to murmur.

Nguyen O'Hara had a dark angular face; his neat mustache had flecks of gray in it. There were epicanthic folds at the corners of his dark eyes. While the cut of his suit was conservative, it was the color of butter — his

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trademark, apparently. He smiled in an entirely different way from Wetherall. Wetherall's smile was bluff and straightforward. Nguyen's grin was sly and insinuating, as if inviting you in on a joke. I found him instantly attractive.

He immediately launched into the story of a woman down in the casino who, only moments before, had pulled a hammer out of her purse and begun to bludgeon the poker machine she'd been playing. When several bystanders attempted to intervene, security had rushed to her defense. "It turns out she's a destruction artist, hired by the casino to commit random acts of vandalism for the amusement of the guests! These people certainly take their spectacle seriously." He laughed as though he were being tickled.

I glanced up again at Laputa. It loomed now like a wok the size of a post office, suspended beneath a yellow balloon. As it eased to a stop, two multi-jointed arms unfolded from its underside; at the same time a boom with built-in stairs rose up from the truck, hydraulics singing. The arms reached for the boom and locked onto it. A hatch opened and I glimpsed a man dressed in a blue uniform and a butter-colored beret. He disappeared. Through the hatch shuffled a stream of people, forty or fifty strong. It was a middle-aged crowd; most wore sneakers and shorts and pix shirts. What was strange was that they each had one what looked like butter yellow boxing glove.

"Tourists?" I asked Nguyen.

He nodded. "The operating costs for a floating house of this quality are quite steep. And unlike my friend Wetherall, I'm not financially independent. If you assume forty sightseers at forty dollars a head times four tours then I make about sixty-five hundred dollars a day from opening Laputa to my public."

At the bottom of the stairs a uniformed attendant collected the yellow boxing gloves and ushered tourists onto a waiting bus.

"More than two million dollars a year," said Wetherall approvingly. "And to think they gave you a MacArthur Grant for your architecture."

"You let all those people tramp through your house?" I said.

"What's good enough for the King of England is good enough for me." Nguyen peered through the windshield. "I do apologize for the delay. It'll be safe to go out in another minute or two."

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"What are the gloves for?"

"Cuts down on breakage — and pilferage. By the way, I'm halfway through your infodump on shitdog psychology."

"Actually, I wrote it as a book."

"Is that so? Very readable, nevertheless. You don't think like most academics. I'm intrigued when you say the shitdogs are not at all proprietary about their finished piles."

"They didn't seem to care when we cut the jewels at Stateline A. And they tolerate scientists taking core samples well enough."

"I wonder what they'd do if we wrapped them in plastic. Some sort of smell abatement device, like a giant baggie. No?" He giggled, then opened the door of the van. "Just a thought. Shall we go?"

He had timed his exit so that the tourists would be able to see him from their moving bus. The windows filled almost immediately with faces. Nguyen smiled and gave them a brisk wave. Wetherall ducked back into the van. I couldn't help but see his look of alarm as he cowered behind the dashboard. After the tour bus had disappeared down the ramp, I gave him a gentle nudge. "They're only people, Wetherall. They don't bite."

"Some of them do," he said.

We were met at the truck by two attendants. On closer inspection I could see their uniforms weren't actually a solid blue but rather a pattern: Nguyen O'Hara's dense calligraphic signature repeated over and over again.

"Anything to report?" said Nguyen.

"Not really. Somebody dropped chocolate on the carpet in the billiards room. Nothing the cleanbots couldn't take care of."

"Very good. I'll be in conference here the rest of the day, so dismiss the tour staff. We'll open tomorrow at ten. Friday we move to the site."

He led us up the stairs. The risers were pix on which messages flashed sequentially, so that Nguyen's canned greeting cascaded down at us like a waterfall of words:

Welcome to Laputa.
Keep in mind
You are entering
a private residence.

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Food, drink and
photography
are prohibited.
Your visit will last
about an hour.
Please note:
there are no
restrooms.

"What kind of house has no bathrooms?" I said.

Nguyen paused at the open hatch and flicked several switches, turning the message off and lights on inside the lifthouse. "Oh, that's only to discourage the tourists. Water is about fourteen kilograms per liter; it's the biggest part of the weight budget. Besides, when we're over a city we can't void waste to the air." He ushered us up the circular stairs.

I'VE NEVER BEEN able to get past my first impression of Laputa: an odd combination of a yacht and my Aunt Galadriel's house. A yacht in that, with the exception of a few movable pieces, all the furniture and chairs were built in. There were no open shelves; what was not stored in the beautifully joined cupboards was battened down behind transparent sheets of nuglass.

Aunt Galadriel lived by herself; in the days before cleanbots, she'd kept a house that was sterile enough to recombine DNA in. Aunt Lindsay and Aunt Kym's house, where I grew up, is a mess, so I always felt a vague sense of guilt when I visited Aunt Galadriel, as if by the mere act of breathing I might be disrupting an order she had taken years of hard labor to impose on her environment.

Aunt Galadriel would have approved of the fastidious housekeeping at Laputa. It was the kind of place a man with a weakness for yellow suits would have to live in.

Laputa had three donut-shaped levels that surrounded a central utility core. In the core were plumbing, water, and waste storage, heating and ventilation, the VTEMF generator, the homebrain and a 300 kilowatt Pons power plant that provided electricity for the living quarters and

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heated the helium in the envelope. Most of the floors were done in pliatex which could be varied with firmness from a mudlike consistency to diamond hardness; all of the open walls were pixes, which could display any color or show any scene stored in the computer. Nguyen called up the palette on a sloping wall in the living room to display the 6.7 million available colors. "Personally," he said, "I worry about visual overstimulation, which is why I rarely stray from my defaults. I'm afraid I'm perceptually old-fashioned. I only use the pixwalls to allow clients to get a feel for the possibilities." Above the living quarters was an exterior observation deck, which we skipped; Wetherall did not seem much interested in taking in the view.

Nguyen led us back down to the bottom level, divided between the entrance gallery and a conference room. Part of the floor here was the exterior hull itself. As we entered the conference room, he made a section of the deck transparent; the garish splendor of the Strip was spread beneath our feet like a two-hundred-dollar whore.

"Excuse me, Nguyen." Wetherall was suddenly pale, "but it's awfully warm in here, don't you think? Could we turn up the air-conditioning?"

"We can go as high as a hundred and fifty meters," he said to me as he opaqued the floor, "which is the limit of the phased VTEMF generators in the truck and the core. Unfortunately, some people find the view from this height vertiginous." He smiled. "Just why such a person would want to build a lifthouse is beyond me."

"The view is not a problem," Wetherall said. But he had sunk into a chair and directed his eyes at the ceiling. "Actually, I think I'm getting to like heights," he told the crown molding. "I just have to prepare myself for it."

Nguyen opened a cabinet door, which revealed a rolled-up rope ladder with teak treads. "In case of an emergency, you can use this to get down quickly."

"Getting down too quickly is what I'm afraid of," Wetherall said. He loosened his collar and then waved for us to join him. "I'm fine. Let's get started."

We sat around the conference table. At its center was a holographic simulation of the Stateline site. Two tiny shitdogs crawled like slugs on the unfinished C pile.

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"Our most critical design restraints have to do with lift and control," Nguyen said. "In almost all cases, the envelope will provide enough buoyancy to keep the house aloft, although we should expect that there will be times when the VTEMF generators will be required to provide backup lift. Otherwise the field will be used to anchor the house in its fixed position."

"So you're going to need some kind of base," I said. "Near the pile."

"Well, we could do away with magnetic fields altogether by making Wetherall's house a propeller-driven airship. Of course, it would need a full-time pilot...."

"No pilots," said Wetherall firmly. "No stewardesses or servants or mechanics or people of any sort. This is the one place in the world where I can be by myself."

"I won't rule an airship out," Nguyen said, "but I agree that it's not a very elegant solution. Besides, an airship would probably require an even more elaborate base station, including a hangar for shelter during extreme wind conditions. And there would of course be periodic equipment inspections and repair. No, I would prefer a Laputa-like solution; a helium balloon locked in place by a very tight electromagnetic tether."

He leaned over the map. "Which brings us to our first major decision: where do we site the base generator? Ideally, we would want to build something permanent. The maximum range of a fixed VTEMF generator locked in phase with a smaller portable such as the one here on Laputa is about twenty-five hundred meters. It would be best if we could locate the base on a height, where it will be safe from shitdog depredations." He touched the A pile and then drew his finger out about forty centimeters. "So if we create a circle with its center at A and with a radius of twenty-five hundred meters..." A white circle appeared on the simulation. "...we see that we are tantalizingly close to several elevated sites. Here to the west we have this spur of the Pilot mountain range; to the south are the Leppy Hills. How close must you be to the jewels, Wetherall?"

"Close enough to touch."

"Sheer extravagance." Nguyen shook his head ruefully. "I would expect nothing less from you. That puts us down onto the flat, which is where we'll need your expertise, Liz. How far will the shitdogs range?"

"Impossible to predict," I said. "While they rarely go more than a

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couple of kilometers from the working pile, one of the Australian shitdogs made a documented run of over eight kilometers. Plus we don't know where they'll decide to start the next pile or how many they'll eventually build."

"Which means we may have to abandon the fixed base concept. If the shitdogs were to eat his base generator, Wetherall here would find himself taking an untethered balloon ride on the prevailing winds. In the unlikely event that he made it over the Wasatch Mountains, he almost certainly would come to grief in the Southern Rockies."

"What if we bury the base?" said Wetherall.

"Expensive, but worth considering — although you still run the risk of having the shitdogs destroy your access. Liz, suppose a shitdog is in a hurry. How fast could it run?"

"Well, we haven't exactly been able to clock them in a race. But in short spurts, as fast as a man, maybe faster. Say thirty-two kilometers an hour."

"So a mobile base similar to my truck down there should be able to outpace a charging shitdog?"

"One shitdog is no problem. But if you were trying to escape a pack of them, there might be trouble."

"I didn't think they traveled in packs," said Wetherall.

"They did on the way here," I said.

"Here is my proposal." Nguyen waved at the hologram and it winked out. "Wetherall, I think we should begin design of your lifthouse immediately, using Laputa as a model. That part of the project ought to go forward, regardless of the final base solution — even if we decide to build you an airship. In the meantime, I'll be moving Laputa to Stateline to survey the site. Liz, I'd like you to come with me. We need to do some experiments." Nguyen pushed back from the table and walked across the room. "We'll have to make a more precise determination of the shitdogs' tolerance of incursions. What sort of activities and/or structures get their attention? What's the deepest they've dug underground? Exactly how fast do they move? What is the likelihood of cooperative behaviors?"

"I'll have to take a leave of absence." The idea would have been unthinkable a few hours earlier. Now I contemplated it with some

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enthusiasm. I guess I'd joined the team. "And the kind of research you're asking for is going to cost...."

"Don't worry," said Wetherall. "That'll be taken care of."

Nguyen opened a cabinet and brought out three crystal glasses and a winebell of Pommery & Greno. "We are agreed then?" He popped the cork, grinning. I wondered what he was so happy about. The design? The commission? The chance to associate himself with Wetherall?

"To our mysterious visitors," said Nguyen, raising his champagne.

"And their jewels." I touched my glass to his.

"To solitude." Wetherall drained his glass, set it back on the conference table, and glanced at his datacuff. "Excuse me, but I've got to be in Munich, Islamabad, and Cornwall, Connecticut, in about fifteen minutes."

The pix on the back of the door of my room — or rather, my suite — at The Zones informed me that the fire escape was seven doors down the hall to my left. I asked it the nightly rate: eight hundred thirty dollars. I had once spent a week at Sebago Lake in Maine for eight hundred fifty dollars, but then the camp I'd rented hadn't come with a waterfall, a Steinway, or a bed the size of the District of Columbia. The room looked like a set for a gropie of *The Thief of Baghdad.*

When Wetherall had checked me in, he'd said he'd call later, that we'd have dinner. It was only after he'd left that I realized I didn't know what *later* or *dinner* meant to a billionaire. It seemed a safe assumption that we'd be going out somewhere, except that Wetherall clearly had an aversion to being seen in public. And I had no idea how long he'd need to honcho his avatars through their meetings. Would we be dining at eight? Ten? Midnight? Should I order room service in the meantime? Did I have time to go down to the casino, skim a couple of hundred off Wetherall's card and gamble? I kicked off my shoes, vaulted onto the bed and bounced.

I freely admit that jumping on beds that don't belong to me is a childish habit that has persisted far too long into my adulthood, but it helps settle me down when I'm on the road. Besides, I liked it that this was something no one knew about me.

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Everything was happening so fast. I was probably going to get my picture in *Eye* with Wetherall. Although that kind of publicity would doubtless ruin my reputation in the department, I enjoyed picturing Saintjohn's reaction. That's right, Dr. Matthewson, I skipped the Curriculum Committee meeting for *this*. And freshmen don't need chip implants — they should be reading books. By *authors*.

Then there was the problem of carrying my course load with the fall semester already three weeks old. Wetherall would probably have to build an addition to the library to make up to the university for that. Meanwhile, I had just agreed to move to Stateline, Nevada, with Nguyen O'Hara and his sly smile. Where was I going to stay? Stateline had no Sheraton.

It was a good bed for bouncing on.

Wetherall's avatar called at eight. I could tell it was the avatar by its witless smile.

"Hi, Liz. Are you hungry yet?"

"I could eat." I casually motioned for the hairdresser to stand in front of the coffee table, blocking the avatar's view of the Peking ravioli I'd ordered from room service.

"I've made reservations for eight-thirty. Is that all right?"

"I'll have to check my calendar. How dressed are we getting?"

"As you see." It was wearing a high-collared white shirt and a blue suit. It hit me that Wetherall wasn't bad looking, in a boyish way. "Can you be ready in twenty minutes?" It didn't wait for an answer.

The hairdresser was looking at me in awe. "That was Ramsdel Wetherall."

"Actually," I said, offering her Wetherall's cash card, "it was an array of electrons with an attitude."

She stared at the card and then back up at me.

"If you're thinking glamorous, you've got it all wrong," I said. "He's — strange."

"I've heard that," she said. Standing behind me, she lifted the hair from the back of my head and sighed; her eyes met mine in the mirror. "You know, there's no reason for you to use your own hair. I can give you a smartwig."

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I eyed the brown pageboy bob I had worn since grad school. "Thanks, but no thanks."

"Still — "

I shooed her away with a hundred dollar tip. There was nothing wrong with my hair and even if there was, I didn't need to know about it. I undressed, swept through the scanner in the closet door and activated the virtual Ragusa in the clothes processor.

A few minutes later I emerged in a long-sleeved black velvet gown that grazed my ankles. It had light boning and back smocking. The sweetheart neckline was just off the shoulders. I'm told I have good shoulders.

There was a knock at the door.

I paused in front of the mirror. So I might've looked better if I'd had an Arpels necklace dangling to my décolletage, but for short notice this would do. I was a professor, not a runway model. And the dinner was actually an appointment with a chill-crazed eccentric with a fear of heights, people, and who knew what else?

But to the world it would be a date with Ramsdel Wetherall. I wondered about the women he normally dated. Did any of them wear their own hair?

When I opened the door I was greeted not by Wetherall, but by a severe, angular man in a charcoal suit that looked like it cost more than my car. He tried to smile but didn't seem to have had much practice at it. "Good evening, Dr. Cobble. I'm Murk Janglish, Mr. Wetherall's lawyer. Perhaps he's mentioned me to you?" He slipped through the door like a watermelon seed. "I hope you don't mind my doing a security check before we go down." He took out a wand and, craning up and down on his knees like a human ironing board, ran it over the length of my body. Then he inspected my irises and hands.

"Do you want to check my teeth?"

"Your teeth are fine. Nice dress." He cocked his head to one side. "I don't know about the hair, though."

I let that go. "I take it Wetherall sent you to pick me up?"

"Actually, he overlooked it. Details are not his strength — that's why I'm needed."

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"I thought the point of all those avatars was to free him from the details."

"His avatars are too good, I'm afraid. They replicate the man himself and all his foibles. They generate almost as much trouble for me as he does. Look, I'd appreciate it if you didn't distract Mr. Wetherall. He's a little scattered at the moment."

"Distract him? In what way?"

He stared at me as if I'd just fallen off the barn. "That's all right. On second thought, I don't think there will be any problems. May I escort you down?"

His gesture at the door might have appeared polite if he hadn't also been hustling me out by the elbow with his other hand.

MURK JANGLISH showed me to the Rain Forest Restaurant in the Tropical Zone of the hotel. He led me to one of the rafts moored on the river that looped through the vastness of the restaurant. The raft had a circular palm-thatched roof from which hung a heavy curtain of mosquito netting — not that there were any mosquitos. Inside the netting was a table set for two. In gold.

"He'll be here," Janglish said. "Sign everything he gives you." And he left.

While I listened to the calls of exotic birds and admired the hordes of butterflies flitting among the branches of the big trees, I ignored the grinding of my stomach and awaited Wetherall. After a few minutes, a tall, awkward-looking man in a safari jacket and khaki hat with a snakeskin hatband detached himself from the bar and sidled past the suddenly oblivious maître d' toward the raft. He parted the netting, and took the chair opposite me. Immediately the raft nudged away from the dock and we were adrift.

"Excuse me..."

The man took off the bushman's hat and brushed his luxuriant brown hair away from his face. It was Wetherall.

"What happened to your blue suit?" I asked.

"Privacy is always worth the effort." He stuck his leg out from beneath the tablecloth, pulled up on the knee of his pants. "Leg extend-

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ers," he said, grinning loonily. He touched his face. "Skin polarizer." He grabbed a strand of his hair and shook it. "Smartwig."

The hair twisted out of his hand and tucked itself back behind his ear. Wetherall slung a backpack from off his shoulder and pulled out a folder. "I have a few things for you to sign."

His *savoir-faire* took my breath away. "Right," I said. "The liability waiver."

Wetherall looked momentarily fuddled. "Damn, I forgot. Janglish will have my head. No, this is about your avatar. Is it hot in here?"

I waited to open the folder because I could see the sommelier paddling toward our table. Actually, she was being paddled by a busboy. She stood in a dugout canoe, cradling a bottle of wine. Other diners looked down at us from tables perched on platforms in the trees that lined the river. The sommelier ducked through the netting to present the wine to Wetherall.

"Tokay is sweet, almost like syrup." Wetherall sniffed the taste the sommelier had poured for him and waved his approval. "It's the only wine I can drink with dinner. You know, it *is* hot in here."

"Shall I open the netting?" said the sommelier.

"No, no," said Wetherall. "It's just me. I'll be fine."

The sommelier filled our glasses and headed for shore. I opened the folder and scanned the form on top. "An avatar is more trouble than I want to get into."

"It only takes a few hours. They take a psychological inventory, run some perceptual tests. Oh, and you'll have to allow them access to some of your personal databases." His expression was innocent. "Don't worry, it's all very secure." I could see how some women might find those deep, guileless eyes — not to mention two hundred and thirty-eight billion dollars — sexy.

"But what do I need one for?"

"To teach your classes. To handle the press. To order materials, manage your research team, search databases. To remember why you thought what you're doing now was such a good idea. Believe me, in a few weeks it'll be hard to imagine how you got along without one."

"What do you mean, teach my classes?"

"I had to promise your Saintjohn Matthewson and the dean that there would be no academic disruption."

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"What gave you the right to interfere?"

"I told you everything would be taken care of."

I glared at him.

"Liz, I need your expertise. When I see talent, I go after it — you know that now. I like to keep my top talent focused. As long as you work for me, I'll try to see to it that you...." A bright green parrot dropped out of the trees and landed on the rail of our raft. "...that you live in a worry-free..." The parrot bobbed its head, turned sideways to examine us with a lustrous black eye. Wetherall hunched over and put his hand to his face.

"What's wrong?"

"I think that bird might be rigged for pix."

"Naah. Looks more like a bomb to me."

For a second I thought he might dive under the table.

"Oh, that was joke," he said. "Perhaps you could signal when you are making an attempt at humor?" He spun his hat at the parrot and it bounced off the netting. "Hey, you bird! *Raaah!*" At this, the parrot squawked and flew away.

"Anyway," he said, picking up the hat, "since I have access to certain resources, I was in a position to ease your transition from the university to my project."

"How many resources did it take?"

He shrugged. "When you get back, there should be a warm body sitting in the Wetherall Chair for the Study of Twentieth-Century Popular Music."

"You mean like jazz? Rock and roll?"

"I have every record the Kinks ever made — on the original vinyl."

I was a little dizzy. The thought of Saintjohn being pushed around like a baby in a stroller was vastly satisfying, and I couldn't help but feel a little exhilarated. With a wave of his hand Wetherall had made the job and the people I spent most of my days worrying about dissipate like a cloud of smoke.

On the other hand, I felt annoyed that, for a pile of cash and a pop-culture sinecure, the university would release me from rules they had never stopped telling me were inflexible. Here was a lesson in where I rated in relation to the world of money.

I set the avatar authorization aside for the time being and glanced at

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the next document. There was a cash card attached to a personal services contract. I separated the card and checked the balance. It was twice my annual salary.

"Wait a minute. I thought this was going to be a quick little consultancy. I'm a teacher. I'm not giving you more than six months, tops."

"I'm not asking you to," he said. "Six months should be more than enough. This is your first month's pay. In advance."

"You can't buy me, Wetherall," I said weakly, even though he knew that I knew that he already had.

The raft bumped against a waiter's station, guided by some unseen system. Our waiter stepped aboard briskly, set a plate in front of me and uncovered it with a flourish. "For you, Madam, Tranches de Jambon Morvandelle. And you, sir, a Mochalicious Jolly Freeze." He topped off our glasses. "Enjoy your meal."

After dinner we strolled through the lobby of the Zones. Wetherall wasn't in his usual hurry to be off to some other appointment. After I'd signed his contracts, our dinner conversation had shifted to pleasantries. Until Wetherall mentioned my parents.

"Was it hard growing up without parents?" he asked.

"You know about that?"

"Yes."

I wasn't about to tell him any more than he needed to know. Especially since I didn't know what he'd spied out about me already. "Lots of children survive without parents. You grew up without a father, didn't you?"

Everyone knew the story of the impoverished childhood that had preceded his rise to wealth.

"Mother was resourceful. We didn't live too far from here — in Colorado."

So we parried evasions for a while. Not that I cared about his childhood. I could see we were about as compatible as mustard and motor oil. We were standing near the doors when Dr. Blaine Thorp found us.

"Ah-hah!" he said, sticking out his hook accusingly.

"What's he doing here?" I said to Wetherall.

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Thorp ignored me and turned to Wetherall. "So Professor Cobble has superseded me in your plans," he said. "I didn't realize that your work required the imprimatur of drab officialdom — I thought you were a visionary!"

"Well, Blaine," said Wetherall, "even visionaries need something solid to stand on. Liz here is of the opinion that your science is rather shaky."

"You liken yourself to the jewels, and everyone else to the pile below!" thundered Thorp. "I wonder how Professor Cobble feels about that comparison."

"Oh, please," I said.

A reporter who'd been staking out Thorp as he staked out the lobby wheeled, his spex trained on us.

I turned to see Wetherall's reaction. There was none. He was gone.

"You lunatic," I said to Thorp. "Why do we have to be in the same field? Why do we have to be on the same planet?"

"You suffer from what Freud called the 'narcissism of minor differences,' my dear," said Thorp. The reporter's spex reflected the overheads. I'd anticipated being linked with Wetherall in tomorrow's papers. Now it was going to look like I'd put on this gown for a date with a chiropractor with delusions of grandeur. I could already hear the laughter of my colleagues.

"I don't know that one." I glanced around the lobby, wondering if I'd really lost Wetherall. "But I'm sure you'll explain." Maybe he was lurking behind one of the marigold trees.

"Simply put, we most intensely dislike those with the greatest similarities to ourselves. They threaten us. Hindus hate Muslims, not Chinese, et cetera. Therefore, you despise me because I reflect your real choices: eccentric science, bizarre alliances."

"Where's the narcissism?"

"Have you glanced in a mirror recently?"

"More recently than you'd imagine."

"So, you feel undue love for those minor characteristics that define your difference from me — primarily your academic sinecure — while ignoring the central resemblance." Noticing the photographer, he struck

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a triumphant pose with his hook. "The irony is, your replacing me in Wetherall's regard was part of my plan."

"How can we replace you when you won't go away?" a voice broke in.

It was Wetherall, back again, trailed by Murk Janglish. Something was going awry with Wetherall's smartwig, and the hair was climbing up around his hat like a many-tendrilled octopus. Meanwhile Janglish was tugging awkwardly on Wetherall's elbow — elbows seemed to be the lawyer's specialty. "Ramsdel," Janglish said, "please. This isn't necessary. Your presence will only focus attention on this situation."

The reporter had that glazed look of deeply gratified desire. The red light glinted in the corner of his spex.

"I'll go away when the secret of the jewels is revealed," Thorp said to Wetherall. "And you and Ms. Cobble are just the ones to do it for me. You'll work from the inside while I guide you from without. Together, the three of us — "

"Together, the three of us will do nothing," Wetherall said.

"Mr. Wetherall," I said. "It's okay, I can handle him — "

"I've no doubt you can, Dr. Cobble," Wetherall said. "But you're working for me now, and I stand by my employees. Dr. Thorp," he said, "if you have any complaints about your treatment, take them up with Mr. Janglish here." Wetherall held out his arm, I took it, and pushing past the photographer, we went straight to the elevator and up to my suite.

Once inside, Wetherall seemed to get an attack of shyness. He wrestled the petulant wig from his head and eyed the door nervously.

"You can wait here while things cool off downstairs," I said.

"That's not the way the paparazzi work. The longer I wait the more of them will gather." He handed the wig to me. "Would you take care of this?"

He slipped out of the room before I could ask him what to feed it.

So I plopped onto a chair the size of a subcompact car, kicked a Donya Durand shoe at the mirror and then stared into it, trying to find the simple, boring Professor Liz Cobble who had gotten out of bed that morning. At least my hair didn't crawl all over my scalp.

Sometimes I blamed my aunts for turning me into that boring Professor Liz Cobble. Aunt Lindsay was Professor of Vertebrate Semiology at the University of Wisconsin, and Aunt Kym ran the only sensory

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deprivation spa in Madison. Growing up in their purple and pink Victorian house had been much more of an adventure than I'd wanted after my parents died. Although I knew I could never *be* normal again, I could at least *seem* normal. Except the outside world was certain that I was living with a pair of lunatics.

The fact that Aunt Lindsay and Aunt Kym loved me only made things harder. For their part, they were open minded when I insisted on wearing clothes to school and dating outside of my gender, although I could tell they thought I was being oppressed by the patriarchy and commodified by the Bank of America. I became a little reclusive, and a little prickly about challenges to my own way of doing things. I spent a lot of time as a child watching myself for signs that I would end up like them, and in reaction I became Ms. Dutiful Grind.

But I still remember the smell of the scented electrolyte that always clung to Aunt Kym like the oddest of perfumes, *eau d'inconscience collective.* And Aunt Lindsay teaching me to read as I sat on her lap and she took me through her charts of the seven stages of courtship in the lesser cetaceans.

I suppose exobiology wasn't a surprising career choice for somebody with a seeker of primal truths in place of one parent and a student of the sign language of animals in place of the other. But I'd intended to be entirely more sober about the way I lived than my aunts.

Except that here I was, rattling around in a new jar of mixed nuts. Fanatic Blaine Thorp and pathetic Ramsdel Wetherall, soft Nguyen O'Hara and hard Murk Janglish. And me.

I had only myself to blame.

One day after my dinner with Wetherall, Nguyen O'Hara and I started for Stateline aboard Laputa, which was being towed by the base truck on its electromagnetic tether. The guest rooms aboard the lifthouse were lavishly outfitted, if not exactly up to Zones standards. Wetherall had arranged to have my office chair and desk moved overnight so I would feel comfortable in my work environment. I chatted briefly with one of his jolly avatars, who said he'd gone ahead to coordinate the arrival of equipment and supplies.

We cleared the Wasatch Range by midday, and the wastes unfolded

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before us. The dwarfing effect of the expanse always catches me by surprise, no matter how many times I visit the desert. The absolute white and flat of the evaporated salt plains takes ordinary vastness to the level of the conceptual: Earth's tabula rasa. The human mind flinches from the blank page. All we can do is build scrawny highways through to the next inhabitable place, out from under the hammer of weather, off the edge of the table of the possible. Whatever their reasons, the shitdogs had chosen the loneliest place on Earth.

Ordinarily the loneliest. For, by the time we arrived at the rendezvous point, we weren't alone. The combination of the Wetherall angle, the Laputa photo op, and the public confrontation with Thorp had rekindled interest in the Stateline site. Two kilometers west of the shimmering piles and dark entrenchments of shitdog territory, a sprawl of vans and campers and bubbles had sprung up; it was almost the size of the army of reporters that covered Holy Joe Jolson on his pilgrimage to Bayonne. Wetherall's people had marked off the boundary of his property, and the media had nested just outside it, on public land.

I had no doubt one of Wetherall's avatars was negotiating for its purchase even as we watched.

As we approached the encampment, the base truck shortened our tether, until we hovered only fifteen meters above the salt flat. I wondered what Nguyen was doing. I wasn't in suspense for long; the truck parked between the Time/Pepsi compound and the *NewsMelt* van. Laputa was to be the star attraction of the media circus. The truck began to reel us in for boarding.

I FOUND NGUYEN in his office. "You're docking right in the middle of the feeding frenzy?"

"Indeed," said Nguyen. "Someone has to be the story—why not us? It was Wetherall's idea, actually. He asked that we stay here to divert attention. He wants to discourage fly-overs at the worksite or the piles. Wise, I think."

"But I'm allergic to cameras," I said. "My tongue swells up and my IQ drops." Nguyen didn't hear me. He peered intently down at the crowd that was gathering around his truck. I thought he might be taking a head count. "You like this, don't you? The publicity?"

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"Whether I like it or not is beside the point. It's part of the business. I'm an architect, Liz. Do you have any idea how many of us are left?"

I shook my head.

"Any computer can design a building these days. All I have to sell is style. If people don't know who I am, then how will they know that I have it? If you're not comfortable with reporters, let your avatar handle them. That's what Wetherall does. He's famous for his accessibility, which is a nice trick considering he's a recluse."

There were at least a hundred people beneath us now. Most were pointing cameras at the stairway that was extending toward the lifthouse from the rear of the truck.

"But if we're in the middle of everything, how is Wetherall going to get on board? They'll spot him in a minute."

He glanced up at me, surprised, then nodded as if he had just discovered an interesting secret. "But Wetherall isn't staying here, Liz. That was never the plan." He showed me the sly O'Hara smile. "Sorry to disappoint, but it's just the two of us."

No sooner had he said this than his screen blinked: a call. I expected Wetherall, or a Wetherall avatar, but it was Murk Janglish.

"We need to discuss your contract, O'Hara," began Janglish, without saying hello. "You've lined out all the work-for-hire language. That won't do."

"My name is Nguyen. Say *Ngu-yen.*"

"Say it? Why?"

"You and Wetherall are like good-cop, bad-cop." Nguyen smiled. "He entices, and you come along afterwards to punish."

Murk Janglish seemed taken aback. "I'm sending you a clean copy," he said. "You need to sign it. No changes."

"All right, Murk." Nguyen's expression was saintly. "But only if you deliver it in person."

"Why the hell would I do that?"

"Why the hell would I do that, *Nguyen,*" said Nguyen O'Hara.

Janglish's screen went dark.

"I don't know whether to describe that as a bad personality or no personality," I said.

"Oh, it's a personality," said O'Hara.

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The first thing I noticed as I came down the stairway was the big stink. The piles were two kilometers away and the air was dead calm and still there it was, like a bituminous skunk in the next door neighbor's yard. Unpleasant, but not yet painful.

I had put on a Laputa uniform so that I could pass as one of the staff. I'd told Nguyen that I wanted to stretch my legs and he had told me that I was free to go as I pleased. That wasn't true exactly. Once the reporters figured out who I was, I'd be trapped in the lifthouse, unless I was willing to give interviews. Which I was definitely not. I was going to let my avatar do all the talking, just as soon as Wetherall delivered it.

I wandered through the colony, listening to the journalists grouse. They complained about the big stink, of course, and the heat and the boredom and the bad food and the power rationing. Fox had ordered another Solelectric array from Salt Lake City, but it wouldn't be operational until next Monday. Several locals from Wendover were trucking in fresh water, which they were happy to sell to the fourth estate at champagne prices.

I discovered one vehicle I knew all too well: Blaine Thorp's "Dog Squad" car. I ducked behind an old school bus before anyone saw me and then sighted back on Laputa to get my bearings, so I could be sure never to come this way again. I wasn't interested in public debates with the lunatic.

It was about ten minutes later that I noticed the Billy Bar wrapper stuck to the flap of a trashcan. I lifted the lid; there were more inside. I knocked on doors nearby until a woman from *Izvestia* directed me to the Jolly Freeze van parked at the easternmost edge of the colony. The sides were dark; the pix of Judy Jolly Freeze sat in a chair, hands folded neatly in her lap, her eyes closed.

"Wetherall?" I walked around the van twice, hunting for some sign of life, then knocked at the rear door. "Wetherall!"

"Liz?" Judy opened one eye. "Ssssh!" She pointed. "Over here." I went around to the side of the van that faced the empty salt vastness.

At first I couldn't see Wetherall's avatar, because it was only half a meter tall and hiding behind Billy Bar's legs. "I want to talk, Wetherall," I said. "I just saw Thorp's car. Let me in."

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"I'm not here," said the avatar. "And I can't talk right now."

"But you are talking. Where are you?"

"Not far, a motel. I'll see you in a few days." The avatar turned away from me and gestured at someone I couldn't see. "No, no, not you. Her. I'll be there in a minute."

"Wetherall, are you with someone?"

"It's just business. Stay right where you are."

"What do you mean, stay where I am? Where would I go?"

"Very good, Cobble." The avatar's voice was full of false camaraderie. "You do that, all right? Good night now." And then it faded. Where its image had cowered, there was only a smooth silver glow in the gathering darkness.

I told myself I didn't care who Wetherall slept with. I only felt sorry for her. So what if he had come back to save me at the Rain Forest? He'd called me Cobble, like I was some junior assistant nobody. I pounded the van with the side of my hand; I think I got Billy Bar right in his pudgy little chin.

"*My* friends call me Liz, asshole."

It was only on the way back to Laputa that it hit me: Why would the avatar have to be insulting, when it could spend as much time with me as necessary, while the real Wetherall was with his bimbo? Wasn't that the point of avatars?

Unless it had been the real Wetherall who answered my call. But that was even more inexplicable: why would he take my call if he were in a motel room with some other woman?

I was back in control by the time I got back to Laputa. I had to be if I intended to pass safely under the quizzical arch of Nguyen O'Hara's eyebrow. And I had decided not to harbor any ill feelings — or any feelings at all — toward Wetherall.

"I'm back, Nguyen." I called, as I climbed the stairway to the living room.

"In here, Liz," he replied from the kitchen. He was sitting at the table with his back to me. I couldn't see at first what he was doing, but I could smell it.

"What's going on?" I asked.

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He had a half dozen saucers arranged in front of him. "Ammonia-formula EasyWipe," he said, pointing. "Vicks Vaporub. Diced vitamins." Two of the saucers contained a scatter of burned remains. "Plastic and rubber," he said and then indicated a ruined something that might once have been an orange or maybe an apple if it hadn't been covered with a greenish, tennis-ball fur. "I retrieved this lovely from the bottom of the composter." There was a odd slackness at the corners of his mouth, a brightness to his eyes.

"Nguyen, we've got more stink than we can handle already."

"A very thoughtful man." Nguyen lowered his face dangerously close to the Vaporub saucer and breathed deeply. "A saint, actually."

"Who?"

"Our good friend Wetherall." Nguyen took a little brown bottle from his shirt and shook it. A handful of pills rattled inside. "Sent us a nosegay." He gave me a dreamy, very un-Nguyen-like leer.

I managed not to tell him just how Saint Wetherall was spending his time while O'Hara and I camped out in Laputa.

The pills Nguyen had dubbed nosegays were prototypes of an anti-stink drug that Wetherall had commissioned. Since there wasn't any cost-effective way to purify the air of shitdog stench, the olfactory psycho-physiologists at Jolly Freeze R&D had instead attacked the brain receptors involved in processing smells. The pills transformed human perception of the big stink. The smell was just as strong as ever, but nosegay users experienced it as sweet and appetizing.

Of course, there were psychotropic side effects: the flood of smell-stimuli had a mild hallucinogenic effect. Certainly Nguyen was acting odd. It was several hours before I was able to talk him out of smearing himself with his own...but never mind. Although Wetherall's avatar assured us that a simple dosage adjustment was all that was necessary, I was wary.

Nguyen was not; he couldn't wait for the new improved batch. It wasn't until I saw that he was able to control his stink tropisms that I was finally convinced to try the drug.

I was impressed. Nosegays transformed the fetid air of the press encampment. And the intoxication induced by the lower dose was mild

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and actually quite pleasant. It made me feel at once silly and happy — like when I jumped on a bed.

I missed jumping on the bed. It just wasn't something you did in a lifthouse.

NOT ONLY DID Wetherall's money make unusual things happen, it made them happen fast. Just last week I'd been worrying about my course load. Now I was writing the handbook for the entirely new art of shitdog management. Meanwhile, though I hardly had time to stop and marvel at it, plasticians were already assembling Wetherall's house. While his avatars oversaw the project, the man himself stayed away. I hadn't seen the real Wetherall since he left my hotel room at the Zones. I imagined him holed up in some Ramada Inn with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.

Maybe I'm a naive academic, but I was surprised at the ferocity of people's interest in what we were doing at Stateline. Sure, Wetherall's business, O'Hara's Laputa and the mystery of the shitdogs were each — to varying degrees — newsworthy in and of themselves, but the publicity surrounding the conjunction of all three was exponential. We always made the news; often as not we were the lead story. And not just in Vegas or LA, but in Berlin and Djakarta!

Profit Week reported that shitdog castings would provide heretofore unimagined materials engineering applications, and that Wetherall would soon roll out a line of casting-based superadhesives.

Hemisphere Confidential Report ran a story, complete with faked blueprints, which proved that Wetherall was building the lifthouse as a kind of degenerate love nest, where smelly and unspeakable sexual acts were to take place.

No, said *Channel Lore,* the lifthouse was designed to be the most secure site on the planet; mercenary shitdogs would act as Wetherall's personal bodyguards against kidnappers and industrial saboteurs.

On *NewsMelt,* Blaine Thorp claimed he'd helped decipher the shitdog's language and explained that Wetherall was moving into the lifthouse to conduct secret negotiations for the establishment of a space-based utopia.

Eye offered this exclusive: Wetherall had devised a way to remove the

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jewels from the piles intact and had already contracted with Cartier's to turn them into the world's biggest necklace. Some insiders speculated he'd offer it as an engagement present to Dawn Zoftiggle. But "inside" insiders revealed that Wetherall had fallen head over heels in love with a woman he'd met while on location near the Stateline site. This mystery woman, it was said by those who really knew, would someday wear the alien jewels.

I credited none of this, of course, except the part about the mystery woman, whom I took to be the bimbo at the motel. But the volume and audacity of the false reports boded ill for his hopes of privacy, once the lifthouse was completed. Meanwhile, Wetherall's avatars gave cheery and innocuous interviews to whomever would listen. Only no one seemed to believe anything they said. Instead, commentators read sinister meaning into their PR platitudes.

Whenever he wasn't working on the project, Nguyen would personally lead reporters through Laputa. He was very disciplined in his approach: he would discuss himself, the lifthouse, the remoteness of the site, the problems of building around the shitdogs and then more about himself. He deflected questions he didn't want to answer with self-deprecating humor, and was gentlemanly about keeping me out of the spotlight, making sure I knew when tours were scheduled so I could retreat to my room. When questions about the shitdogs came up, he transformed me into an anonymous committee. It was always "My experts tell me that..." or "I've consulted my advisors on this...."

I was grateful for Nguyen's discretion, because Wetherall had yet to deliver my avatar.

Murk Janglish tried to explain it during one of his visits to Laputa. "Never seen anything like it, actually," he said. "At first I thought it was your fault. Maybe you sabotaged the inventory or something, but the techs say no. There must have been some noise in the signal when your personality was scanned."

I was secretly gratified. I liked it that they were having troubles cramming me into their damned program.

"I'll be patient," I said. "But I'm not going public. Nguyen will just have to keep shielding me."

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"Shielding you?" said Janglish icily. "More like throwing himself at every camera he sees."

Nguyen smiled.

"You're getting so much publicity out of this, O'Hara, you ought to be paying *us*."

Nguyen laughed out loud. "Now what would my good friend Wetherall do with more money?" he said, refilling Janglish's champagne glass. "He has got far too much as it is."

Two days later Nguyen and I stood out on the salt flat, our noses filled with the fragrance of shitdogs digesting. It would have been delightful except for the late afternoon sun beating on us. We were waiting for the driver of the prototype mobile base that the Jolly Freeze engineers had thrown together. I had ordered a test run to see how the dogs would react. At the moment they lay pulsing, looking as oblivious and lazy as ever.

They weren't, of course. Things were changing.

I'd spent the last two days confirming my discovery, and calculating the rate of change. I was trying to decide how much to reveal — because here I was, Wetherall's magnificently paid shitdog expert, the rational scientist who had replaced mooncalf Thorp — and I didn't know what it meant. But then I wasn't sure what any shitdog behavior meant.

"The shitdogs are eating and excreting faster," I blurted out. "The third pile here is accumulating at almost twice the rate of the first two."

"Hmmm," said Nguyen. "Could it be that they're adjusting to Earth conditions — getting better at whatever it is they do?"

"They're showing no comparable changes at any of the other sites," I said. "I checked the international database earlier today."

"Maybe it's a response to our activities," said Nguyen.

"That's my guess, but don't quote me."

"Which activities? Our construction is taking place far from them. We're observing them, but they've been observed before."

I shrugged. "I don't know how this will affect the project," I said, "but it does represent an advance in shitdog studies. For the first time we can be certain that the piles are a product rather than a byproduct. If they were only concerned with getting enough to 'eat,' their rate wouldn't change. The fact that they've speeded up confirms that it's production."

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"They feel acknowledged, perhaps," said Nguyen playfully. "They wish to encourage art appreciation. Fair enough. More jewels to look at. But if this news gets out, it's going to attract even more attention."

"It'll get out eventually," I said. "Exobiologists will take notice; shitdog behavior doesn't change often. And it isn't happening at the other sites."

"Hmmm," said Nguyen. "Maybe we should build lifthouses at all the other sites too. Then Stateline wouldn't be so distinctive."

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell this to Wetherall until I've figured out the implications."

I didn't tell Nguyen my suspicion that the configuration of the piles and jewels might have some semiotic significance. Aunt Lindsay had done her dissertation on how the shape of African termite mounds was evolutionarily designed to communicate to other termite colonies. If, as it appeared, shitdog behavior could respond to that of humans, then that suggested the possibility of a feedback loop — shitdog behavior influencing humans, who then influenced the shitdogs. A kind of subliminal, semiotic communication. But this notion was so Thorplike I did not want to have to admit to it until I understood more.

Nguyen was gazing up at pile C. He turned and winked, as if letting me in on a joke. Only I didn't get it. Not all signs are so easily read.

The base rolled up and stopped, clicking in the heat. The driver was dressed entirely in denim, his red-bearded face shadowed by a hat the size of a manhole cover. He motioned for us to enter; the cab had been fitted with first class airline seats. Nguyen climbed in first. When the driver reached out to help me up, his grip, cool as a Billy Bar, made me do a double take. It was Wetherall.

"Great to see you again, Liz." His big, oblivious smile flashed through the fake whiskers. There was no apology for humiliating me outside the Jolly Freeze van.

Nguyen took it in stride. "So I take it you've gotten yourself instructed on how to drive this from the crew."

"I arranged a private tutorial."

"You might at least have let us know in advance," I said.

"Then Janglish would've had to be here to make sure I didn't have any unscheduled fun."

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"Oh, Murk's not that bad," Nguyen murmured, "for a stone-hearted workaholic. You took a nosegay? We'll be parking right next to Stink Central."

Wetherall slipped into the driver's seat in front of us and strapped himself in. "About twenty minutes ago. When I was a kid I used to grow orchids. I had this one cattleya, Bealls Red. It was dark as blood and had a fragrance big enough to fill a room." He took a deep breath. "That's what I'm getting now." He leaned back in his seat, eyes glazing momentarily at the memory. "The nosegays are an extraordinary accomplishment. A shame we have to hold them off the market."

"You're not going to sell them?" I said. "But think of the applications."

Wetherall punched the code that started up the turbine. "Liz, the big stink is my fence; it's how I'm going to keep the world out. Why would I pull that fence down after I've gone to all this trouble to acquire it?"

The arrogance of the man made me momentarily dizzy. Or maybe it was the swelter in the cab. I could feel sweat tickle down my side.

"Doesn't that beard make you warm, Wetherall?" I said. "I thought you liked life on ice."

"It *is* a little close in here." Nguyen swabbed his forehead with a butter-colored handkerchief.

"Oh, my clothes are air-conditioned," he said. "I couldn't think straight without them."

Wetherall, Nguyen and I giggled like kids as the shitdog chased us. Of course, Wetherall's nosegays had something to do with our delight. We sat strapped into seats underneath a nuglas bubble. The base roared across the salt flat on its six treads, kicking up scuffs of salt and sand and scraps of the low, dry junipers that grew here and there in the basin. We were headed away from the Stateline A pile; the shitdog galloped in its ungainly way behind us like a nightmare rocking horse. As we drove, we fired a simulation tracking beam up at a helicopter that was standing in for Wetherall's future house. So far, so good — no matter our position or speed, the beam remained unbroken.

Our initial approach hadn't aroused their interest. They ignored us as we zoomed around the pile, and they ignored us when we idled a few yards away from them. They hadn't even sniffed at the mobile base, let alone

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nibbled. That was when Wetherall brought out a smart lasso. As we pulled alongside one he opened the window, leaned out, swung four big loops and let it fly. The running noose slithered over the shitdog's head. Wetherall tied the end to the armrest on the door and then stomped on the brakes.

We lost the door but had finally provoked one into chasing us.

It smelled like heaven's own bakery. "Chocolate-covered raspberries!" shouted Wetherall. "Bittersweet chocolate, I mean."

"Chai tea, with plenty of honey and buttermilk," corrected Nguyen. "And perhaps a crumb of pistachio baklava, too."

Myself, I kept catching smell-glimpses of Billybars and Charley Chuncolate Cones. Why should activating my odor-pleasure centers recall Jolly Freeze products? Those were Wetherall's positive smell associations, not mine.

"Liz." Wetherall touched my wrist. "Do you think it's angry at us?"

I turned to the beast that galumphed patiently after us. "Who can say? We've hardly worked out their vocabulary of expressions — short of barking at the Chileans that one time, they don't have any. It certainly seems more sporting than angry, though. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes," said Wetherall. "Though I could be projecting. That is to say, sporting is the perfect word for how I feel. Our mobile base is going to work just fine, isn't it?"

"All the data is not yet in," Nguyen said. He glanced at me significantly. I guessed he was waiting for me to mention the changes I'd observed. "Remember, the real base is going to be towing a house six times the mass of Laputa. That will reduce maneuverability significantly."

"Nevertheless — "

As they debated, it occurred to me that we'd stumbled onto something that would make a tourist attraction if the word got out — shitdog-wrangling. The nosegays added a certain essential élan to it all. I was sure a lot of people would pay handsomely for the fun we were having. The tickets we could sell would pay for a dozen Laputas. But with Wetherall's deep pockets and craving for privacy, I doubted whether anyone but he would ever sample this novelty.

That night, Wetherall stayed with us for the first time. Nguyen had Laputa towed to where Wetherall's lifthouse was under construction.

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Since this site was almost three kilometers closer to the piles, we had to double our dosage of nosegays to cope with the big stink.

Over dinner, Wetherall was talkative and charming, Nguyen was taciturn. Finally he spoke. "Perhaps it's time to name your house, Wetherall?"

"How about Queen Jolly Freeze?" I said. "Pretend it's just a floating ice cream truck. That way no one will guess it's where you live." This time I wanted Nguyen to turn and wink, laugh with me at this ludicrous man. But he ignored me.

Wetherall was busy fantasizing about his house. "When we run the first test, I want to be on board," he said. "Let's take it over pile A, so I can try the viewing room. If we need to make any adjustments, I want them done as soon as possible."

"You sure you can steel yourself to look down from such a height?" said Nguyen.

"At least there, I'll have something worth looking at."

"All right," sighed Nguyen. "I suppose it's time I see these jewels for myself."

Wetherall looked shocked. "You haven't seen them yet!"

"I've been busy," Nguyen said. "Other matters required my attention."

"My god, Nguyen," said Wetherall. "The jewels are what this is all about."

"For you." He sighed. "Oh, I've looked at pixes. They're admirable."

"You may not be the sort of person they are designed for," I said.

Wetherall picked up on that instantly. "What do you mean?"

I did not want to spill the beans on my theory so soon. "Nothing. Just that the jewels seem to fascinate some people more than others."

"Like Wetherall and you?" Nguyen said.

"And Thorp," Wetherall added.

I laughed. "Let's leave him out of this."

"Why did you call them shitdogs, Liz?" Nguyen asked. "Aren't you embarrassed to be studying something called a shitdog?"

"The Marines named them. Nobody asked me," I said. It was a sore subject, so I changed it. "What about that name for your house?"

"If that's what you want," said Wetherall. "Queen Jolly Freeze will do nicely."

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As dinner went on, Nguyen became increasingly quiet. He hadn't been eating well of late, he told us, because everything tasted like boiled potatoes.

"It's true," said Wetherall, digging a spoon into a melting scoop of Mintastic. "Even my private blend of Jolly Freeze has clearly suffered flavor degradation. But they tell me it's temporary. Don't worry, your taste buds will bloom again, Nguyen. Besides, it's a small price to pay for the jewels — and all this emptiness."

"As rewarding as this project has been," said Nguyen wearily, "I begin to look forward to its completion."

At that, I felt a vague dismay. Without noticing, I'd gotten used to Nguyen O'Hara's company, his dark, ironic presence.

He stood abruptly, muttered something about running some simulations and was gone before either of us could protest. Wetherall and I looked at each other across the table, then I glanced quickly down at my plate. Being stranded for the evening with the Emperor of Ice Cream was not what I'd had in mind.

ETHERALL AND I descended from the lifthouse and crossed the flat, our shoes crunching the packed salt. The temperature must have dropped thirty degrees — it was Wetherall weather. Tonight the extra dose of nosegays made the big stink smell like the fruitcake cookies Aunt Lindsay makes for Bastille Day. A kilometer away, Pile A was a dark silhouette against the star-filled sky. The outcropping of jewels glinted at the top. One of the shitdogs circled the base, and in the distance I saw another lumbering toward the mountains.

I still wasn't sure why I'd agreed to leave Laputa for some after-dinner jewel-viewing. Perhaps I didn't want to admit how much Nguyen's abrupt departure had dashed some obscure hopes in me. At least in the dark I didn't have to look at Wetherall looking at me.

I stopped to glance up. There were billions of stars, one for every dollar of Wetherall's hideous fortune. The Milky Way flowed like a silver river across the sky. Off in the distance, the Pile A jewel outcropping gave off minor reflections in a hundred colors. I felt small.

"It's a big universe," said Wetherall. "One time my mother and I —

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we were living in Telluride, I must've been ten or eleven. The sky was full of stars, like tonight, and for the first time I realized — they were here a million years ago and they'll be here a million years from now."

He looked up into the night. I caught his scent as I walked beside him. He smelled like tears.

I felt sorry for him. Damn those nosegays — what I wanted to feel was irritation. I wanted to tell him, of course you're mortal, bud. What you're talking about is the human condition, not some problem only you have.

I didn't say anything. After a moment he spoke again.

"So where did the shitdogs come from, Liz?"

"Howard at Cambridge speculates they come from a planet orbiting a star of spectral type B. He bases this on their skin color, and that third eyelid they have."

"That's a pretty elaborate structure to build on a foundation of air."

"You should know about building structures on air."

He laughed. His face was a white smear in the darkness, his eyes two shadows. He stood quite close. For some reason my heart was racing. He leaned forward, then suddenly pointed over my shoulder. "Damn media leeches! Quick, follow me."

I turned and saw jeep lights sweeping by.

Before I could say a word Wetherall dashed off toward a pile of rubble a few hundred meters away. I stayed put and watched the jeep pull up to Laputa's stairs. Murk Janglish got out and took the steps two at a time.

I went to tell Wetherall. The debris was tailings piled up at the entrance to a shitdog tunnel. The hole gaped black as a tar pit, six meters across. I couldn't find Wetherall among the heaps of salt and rock. "Oh mogul!" I called. "Here mogul, mogul, mogul. There's a good mogul."

"Shhhhh!" he hissed. His arm appeared from behind one of the nearer piles, waving me toward him. "They'll hear you."

"Don't worry. It's only your lawyer."

"Murk? What's he doing out here at this time of night?"

"Subpoenaing snakes? How should I know?"

"Come here for a second." He was standing at the edge of the tunnel. "How deep do you suppose this thing goes?"

"You've read my reports. We've sent drones down as far as six

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kilometers, but there's no reason the dogs can't go deeper. For all we know they cruise the mantle."

Wetherall tossed a pebble into the pit. It was a long few seconds before it hit and rattled. "And what are the chances a shitdog is going to pop out of this hole and eat us?"

"The shitdogs don't inhabit these tunnels, and don't revisit them after they've dug them. The average length of a tunnel is six point three kilometers, average depth two point five. The walls are covered with excreta chemically similar to the pile excretions, which forms a mastic to reinforce the tunnel against.... What's so funny?"

I could see his smile in the darkness. "You are so serious about your work."

It was past time to tell him about the change in the shitdogs' behavior. I evaded. "At least I care about something besides money."

"Money? Me? You've got the wrong idea about me, Liz. I'm just the goose that lays the golden eggs. I don't bother with what happens afterward. It's people like Murk who sit on the nest."

"Watch out — you might trip over that metaphor." I turned and started walking away.

"I didn't mean to make fun of you." He caught up to me. "Nguyen's right about us being alike, you know. When I look at you I see myself with an academic veneer. Those jewels speak to me, Liz, in a way nothing else ever has. The problem is that I don't understand them — yet. I don't expect that the jewels are going to hand me the secrets of the universe." I tried to get away from him, but he matched my stride. "I'm not even sure that once I do understand them, I'll be able to explain. But I am certain I'll be surprised."

He got in front of me, made me stop. "I like being surprised," he said. "You surprise me."

"Right," I said. "And I didn't even sign the waiver."

He shook his head. "There aren't many people as strong as you are," he said. "Two hundred and thirty-eight billion dollars is like a black hole. It can crush the life out of everything that comes near it."

Me, strong? I had some trouble catching my breath. I thought I knew what was coming next, and I wasn't sure I wanted to hear it.

"What do you think of me, Liz?"

"I don't know," I lied. "I think you're rich."

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"Is that good or bad?"

A part of me wanted him to like me. And I didn't want to hurt his feelings. Then I remembered the way he'd brushed me off for some bimbo in a motel room. Maybe it was the wine, the night, his self-absorption, but I couldn't take it anymore. "I don't understand you, Wetherall. Good or bad? I suppose it wouldn't be so bad if you would grow up and do something with your money. But what do you do? You buy a company so you can eat ice cream all day long. You hide behind avatars. You wear disguises. You play with your lasso. You sleep with supermodels. You hire people so that you can deal with them only on your own terms. You build a huge toy house, float it someplace as far away from human contact as you can manage, take drugs to scramble your senses so you can ignore the stink of the pile of shit you're hovering above, and stare at the pretty jewels. Is that the best you can come up with?"

Wetherall didn't say anything. The silence stretched. Suddenly I wished he'd get mad, tear into me, tell me off for my perpetual smart mouth. He just stood there.

"Let's go back," he said. "I'm tired."

I felt as churned up as if *he'd* assaulted *me*. "I'm sorry," I said. "I don't know what's gotten into me tonight."

"Too many nosegays."

"Maybe. I've said too much."

We walked in silence back to Laputa. Later, I lay awake trying to figure out why I had unloaded on him so mercilessly.

The next morning Wetherall was gone. No farewells, no nothing. His avatars called several times in the days that followed, but none of them brought up our starlight stroll in the desert. I tried to justify what I had said — he had asked me, hadn't he? — and concentrated on my work.

The pattern of the three dark shitpiles on the white Stateline salt flats struck some obscure chord in my mind. I ran schematics of all five shitdog sites through my computer, trying to isolate some algorithm common to all of them. Surely all this was not without some meaning.

Meantime, construction on Queen Jolly Freeze continued.

Three or four nights later, I was staring in a trance at recent pix of the

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Pile A jewel cluster when Nguyen stopped by my room. "Knock, knock," he said, standing in my doorway. He had a winebell of Pommery & Greno tucked under an arm, two glasses in hand.

"If this is a joke," I said, "go away. If not, come in and open that."

He set the glasses on my desk. Self-conscious about my woolgathering, I touched a key and the image on the screen was replaced by a graph of pile growth rates at each of the five shitdog sites. Stateline had shot well into the lead. Nguyen raised an eyebrow — he knew I still hadn't reported the change to Wetherall.

But he didn't speak of it. "Have you noticed what nosegays do to champagne?" He opened it and filled my glass halfway, finishing with an absurd flourish.

I took the glass from him.

"What does it smell like to you?" he said.

I sniffed. "Shoe polish?"

"Not unpleasant, but probably not worth sixty dollars a bell either." He shrugged. "Smell is not something many architects bother with, you know. It's hard to design for, though every building has its own peculiar odor. A castle smells different from a grass shack. Laputa smells nothing like Monticello. I have a colleague, Utrini, who installs olfactors in every room that he builds. He claims a scent palette in the thousands." Nguyen paused. "What do we smell like to them?" He gestured out the window. "The shitdogs?"

"I don't know that they have a sense of smell," I said. "But if they do, the fact that they've created such an intense odor source and stay so close to it is suggestive."

"Maybe they think we stink?"

I touched my glass to his. "One man's champagne is another man's cod liver oil."

His grin was fleeting. "We're uncomfortable with scent," he said, "because it reminds us that we're animals. That's why we tend to repress all but a few more or less pleasant aromas. We don't like to admit how powerful smell is in our lives." He fell silent for a moment, considering. I refilled his glass. "I've spent more time thinking about smell in past few days than I have my entire life."

I wondered if he were flirting with me. "What's this all about, Nguyen?"

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He gave me an odd, detached smile. "Have you considered the potential of nosegays as an aphrodisiac?"

"Now you sound like Wetherall." I felt my cheeks flush. All those bubbles in the champagne.

"You shouldn't believe everything you see on *America, America.* You've met the man. Did he strike you as any kind of ladykiller?"

"No," I said, "but then, we have no interest in each other."

"Ah, but that's my point exactly. For instance, I have no romantic intentions toward you, Liz. Whatsoever."

"You say the sweetest things, Nguyen."

"I'm not trying to insult you," he said. "I think you're charming and intelligent. I hope that I've earned some small measure of your friendship. But without going into grisly details, let's just say that you're not my type."

"I see. And why is it important I know this all of a sudden?"

Nguyen tugged at the cuff of his shirt. "I'm finding that nosegays stimulate my libido in a very unwelcome way."

I just stared.

"It's nothing I can't control. But every so often when I catch your scent I feel...eroticized. Very unprofessional, but there it is. I just wanted you to know why, the other night at dinner, I had to leave so abruptly, for example. I wouldn't want you to think I was being rude."

I knew now my cheeks were burning. "And you think this has something to do with nosegays?"

He nodded. "I'm quite sure. I take it you haven't noticed any similar reactions?"

I shook my head.

"Then you are lucky." Again he raised his eyebrow, as if I wasn't quite getting the message. "Or perhaps it is only the male of the species."

"What if I switched soaps?" I said. "Or tried some kind of perfume? Would that help?"

"No," he said wistfully. "I believe that would make it worse."

Nguyen left half a bell of champagne behind. I finished it for him without really intending to. I was dumbfounded by his confession. I turned it over and over, like a chipmunk with a long, lost acorn. Was it a come-on?

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Finally I reached for the phone and punched in a call to Wisconsin. Aunt Lindsay answered. Her hair was done up in orange cornrows — a new style for her, but then she changed styles just about every other semester. "Liz!" she said. "I'm so glad you called! Send me some money."

"You may think that's a joke, Aunt Lindsay, but he's paying me enough that I could buy your house."

"You couldn't afford the waterproofing." She peered into the camera. "What's the matter, dear?"

I told her all about Wetherall, the walk on the salt flats, my fit of brutal honesty at the moment he'd expressed a liking for me. And then Nguyen's bizarre revelation. "How could Nguyen be well within the bounds of what I consider my type when I'm not even remotely close to his? I drive one man away from me in terror while the other fights manfully to master his perverse attraction to me. What's wrong with me?"

"Absolutely nothing."

"But what does Nguyen mean when he says he feels 'eroticized'? *What* grisly details? When he looks at me it's like my recurring nightmare where I walk into class naked and have to teach Kardashev's system for classifying extraterrestrials to hormone-soaked college boys."

"There is no other sort of college boy. Listen, does this Mr. O'Hara cross his legs when he's sitting near you? Does he stand with his torso canted forward at an angle of four to seven degrees?"

"I have no idea," I told her.

"How about the billionaire?"

"He seldom sits still long enough for me to analyze his kinesics."

"Maybe you should try. You seem confused about him."

"He's a confusing person."

"He didn't try to use that smart lasso on you, did he? Sometimes those rope boys don't know when to stop."

"Aunt Lindsay, please. I don't know why I got myself mixed up in this! My life was predictable. I was a respected professional in a stable environment. Now I'm on the net with madmen like Thorp, chasing lunatics like Wetherall across the salt flats, playing guessing games with egomaniacs like O'Hara. I've got a doctorate in exobiology!"

"You've always put too much store in the Ph.D., Elizabeth. That skanky Dr. Matthewson from your department called here the other day,

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asking odd questions about the sofa in the faculty lounge. Is that really the 'stable environment' you're interested in? You've been in universities long enough to recognize that ninety percent of everything is bullshit. 'Piled higher and deeper.'"

I guess I should have known better than to seek my aunt's opinion on normal behavior. "But what should I *do*?"

"As long as you make sure you are getting enough antioxidants," Aunt Lindsay said, "you should do your best to enjoy every minute of it."

IT WAS STILL DARK when Nguyen woke me by pounding on my door. My head was pounding, too. "Murk wants to speak with you. He's very upset. Wetherall is missing."

"Nguyen, it's five-thirty-three in the morning."

"Please, Liz. He's suffering."

I stumbled out to the lounge vid center. Despite the early hour, Janglish was already in his power suit. He looked as if his collar were strangling him. "Cobble, what the hell have you done with Ramsdel Wetherall?"

"That's *Dr.* Cobble. And I haven't done a damn thing with him."

"Not for lack of trying. The naive act isn't going to fool me, Cobble. You were pretty slick about dodging the waiver. But just because you didn't sign doesn't mean you can sink your hooks into him."

"You tried his hotel?"

"You *know* he was never at that hotel. He was just using the room to forward his messages. I began to get suspicious when it was always an avatar that answered whenever I called him there. Couple that with several reckless remarks he made about you, and I realized you must have him. I want him back now, do you hear me?"

"I believe they can hear you in Stuttgart, Mr. Janglish."

"Murk," Nguyen broke in, "you're way out of line, even for you. We haven't seen Wetherall since he left after the mobile base test. He hasn't made it out to the site in days. And Liz has been here all along — I would certainly have noticed if she had been sneaking off to cavort with the boss."

"You're vouching for her, Nguyen?" sniffed Janglish.

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"Why yes, I suppose I am." Out of range of the camera he drew a one with his forefinger for the favor I now owed him.

Janglish was only slightly mollified. "Well, then okay. For now. But I want you both to start looking for him. Give it your highest priority. Your project has got him neglecting his real responsibilities. There are ten transnational enterprises dependent on his input. I'm holding you responsible for distracting him. And if I find out that you've seen him and then let him get away, I'll make you sorry you ever heard the name Murk Janglish."

"I already am," I muttered.

"Now, Murk," said Nguyen, "you really ought to calm down. Wetherall is a slippery devil. Trying to catch him will only raise your blood pressure."

Janglish glared back at Nguyen. "It's already a hundred and eighty over ninety, and I don't think you've helped it one bit." Then the screen went black.

"I believe I enjoy a special rapport with that man," Nguyen mused. "What do you think?"

"What was he going on about?" I asked. "What reckless remarks?"

Nguyen squinted out the window at the spectacular sunrise over the Wasatch Mountains. The shadow of Pile C pointed toward Laputa like an accusing finger. "I'll try the construction base," he said. "Maybe he has some hiding place I've missed."

"I'm going to take a Serentol," I said, and headed for the bathroom.

I donned one of Nguyen's staff uniforms, took a jeep, and headed across the flats toward the press encampment. The place seemed unusually busy for seven in the morning, but then, reporters on assignment don't sleep much. I ignored the swarm headed for the press tent, parked the jeep near a sol-power unit and prowled down the aisles of trucks, vans, and satellite uplinks. Nests of fiberoptic cables sprawled across the scuffed salt. Finally I found what I was looking for.

The Jolly Freeze van was parked near the edge of the camp. There was no one in sight. I circled around to the back and kicked at the door. Not only did it feel great, but I believe I may have dented it.

"Wetherall!" I shouted. "Come out of there, you weasel!"

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The door opened. Wetherall leaned out, grabbed me by the wrist, and yanked me in. "Thank God you're here, Liz."

Unlike the van he had used to pick me up at the university, this one was outfitted as a camper. There was a teak bunk, a teak drop table, a compact but sophisticated media center, galley, head. Three smart lassos lay coiled under the bunk. On the pix was the Queen Jolly Freeze construction site. The exterior of the house was completed, and workmen were entering and exiting through the balcony entrance.

"You've been here all along, haven't you? Even that night when I was outside this van trying to talk to you, you were here, not in any hotel."

"Yes," he admitted.

I thought for a moment. "Did you even have a woman in here with you, or did you just invent her to make me feel used?"

"That wasn't why I invented her, Liz. I just wanted to keep away from Murk."

"Right in the middle of the biggest army of reporters in the country?"

"The Purloined Letter dodge. I'm sorry I deceived you."

"You're not forgiven. Do you know that Janglish has accused me of stealing you away from your 'responsibilities'?"

"Murk has a different view of my responsibilities than I have. He figures if he controls the women I see, then he controls me."

"Has it occurred to you that I don't give a damn about your women?" I was so angry at the man that I felt as if I had stepped aside from myself. What I did next shocked me. "Look, I've had enough of this. I quit. Hire Thorp, for all I care."

I turned and stalked out of the van. I tried to slam the door behind me, but Wetherall caught it. "Liz," he protested. "Please don't go."

I stormed down the aisle of vehicles, Wetherall following me, begging me to listen to him. There was some commotion in the press camp. Reporters were milling around the main tent, trailing cameras and cable. No one noticed Wetherall, even though he wasn't wearing a silly hat or a phony beard. I spotted Nguyen about the same time as he saw me and made a broad pointing gesture toward Wetherall. *I've got him,* I mouthed.

You take him, I thought.

Nguyen bumped his way over to us. There was salt dust on his butter-

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colored suit. His eyes were wide with excitement. "Big doings," he said. "You have to see this."

"Why?" I said.

Without replying, he ushered us over to the tent and picked up the edge where it had come loose from a stake. We ducked through.

Blaine Thorp was giving a press conference, only the sound system was so loud that I couldn't understand what he was saying. I heard him bellow the word "*convergence.*" Nguyen pushed into the crowd to get a better look; I grabbed Wetherall by the sleeve and tugged him into the back corner of the tent, behind some sound equipment. Wetherall looked hunted. He was surrounded by reporters, the enemy, breathing the same sweltering air that they breathed. I had never seen him sweat until that moment.

I don't think it was because the air-conditioning in his shirt had failed.

Convergence. Earlier in the day, it had been reported, the shitdogs in all four of the other sites had ducked their noses and begun digging. Every shitdog on the planet besides ours here at Stateline had simultaneously disappeared under the crust of the desert.

When it became apparent that the shitdogs weren't resurfacing, robot probes were sent in after them, to track their movements, and chart the direction of their digging, if there was any direction to it.

There was. All four sets of shitdogs were tunneling in a straight line directly for Nevada.

They were closing ranks, and Stateline had been declared base.

Somebody adjusted Thorp's microphone.

"That's precisely what I'm saying, Darla," he told a reporter in the first row. "The Atacama Desert, the Gobi Desert, Ethiopia's Danakil Plain, and Lake Disappointment in Australia are all about eight thousand statute miles, as the crow flies, from Stateline. As the mole burrows, that's a little over seven thousand miles. Assuming the shitdogs can burrow at a top speed of eight miles per hour, they'll be here in fifteen days."

"That can't be right," I said to Wetherall. "He's got the math wrong."

"So what happens when they get here?" Someone shouted a follow-up.

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"Nothing right away, I hope. But that depends on stopping any further disturbance of the shitdogs, the casting piles or the jewels. The shitdogs are the advance wave for the race of aliens who sent them. Call these aliens the 'Big Dogs.' The casting piles are the power sources and the jewels the beacons. What we have here is an attractive nuisance set up by these superminds. A fire alarm. If we mess with it, thereby showing our intelligence, we set off the alarm. And Ramsdel Wetherall, with his construction activity, his wrong-headed advice from the academic establishment, and his obsession with the jewels, is intent on giving us away. Does he realize this? Of course he does! How could he not? It's common knowledge that pile C here in Stateline has been growing at an alarming rate, while there has been no change at any of the other sites. He's tripped the alarm, and wants to bring the Big Dogs down. That's the reason we've got convergence, and that's why we've got to stop him."

I couldn't stand it anymore. I stood up and waved my hand frantically. Wetherall blanched and tried to pull me back, but it was like facing Matthewson at a Curriculum Committee meeting. "What a load of unfounded bullshit!" I shouted.

In the corner of my eye I saw Nguyen slip out of the tent. Thorp squinted until he made me out against the lights. "Dr. Cobble? I'm glad you deigned to show up. You have a better explanation?"

"What is this theory based on, other than your Ouija board? It sounds like the plot of some pre-millennial sci-fi movie. I've known about the growth in pile C for weeks, and you just figured it out!"

The reporters turned, Wetherall clutched at my arm, and I realized that once again my passion had carried me a little past the bounds of discretion. "Oops," I whispered.

"Let's get out of here," Wetherall muttered.

We made a dash for the outside. When the reporters realized the man next to me was Wetherall, they rushed after us, and nearly cut us off before we could leap into Nguyen's jeep.

As we sped across the flats toward Laputa, Nguyen spoke to Wetherall. "I believe we are faced with a moment of truth."

On the ride back, I sat beside Wetherall and tried to melt into a puddle so I could soak though the floorboards into the salt flat. I should have told

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him about pile C days ago. He knew I knew. I knew he knew. Now Thorp was villifying us both, and I'd handed him the means to do it.

Wetherall spoke first. "We've got to hurry up the launch."

"Listen," I said. "I screwed up. I let Thorp scoop me on the big story. But that doesn't justify all that garbage he's dumping on us. Don't let him force our hand."

"The shitdogs have forced our hand, Liz," said Wetherall, his voice flat. I tried to read him, but couldn't. It was probably because he was planning to send Murk Janglish over to lop off my head for what I had — or rather, hadn't — done. But why was I worried that he might fire me? I had just quit.

By the time we reached Laputa, Wetherall was already planning his counter-strike. He would hold a press conference of his own, float a raft of different but eminently plausible explanations of the shitdogs' behavior to defuse any panic Thorp might have aroused.

"Thorp's not a credible scientist," I protested. "We don't need to respond."

"We?" said Wetherall. "So we're 'we' again?"

"I'm sorry, Wetherall," I said. "For everything. How about a deal? If you don't fire me, I won't quit."

Nguyen's eyebrows arched but he said nothing. Neither did Wetherall. He simply offered me his hand and we shook. His hands were warmer than I remembered. He didn't seem angry or disappointed with me, only focused on our next step.

"Then we can proceed immediately. You'll speak for us, Liz. You carry more weight than Thorp. You can make him look like the eccentric he is."

A lot Wetherall knew about eccentrics. "But I can't face down an army of reporters. They'll nibble me to death."

"You don't have to," said Wetherall. "Your avatar is ready. She can do it."

I sat with Nguyen in Laputa's media room to watch the press conference. Wetherall was holed up in his room.

On the pix, it looked just like a live press conference. Behind the microphones were Wetherall and I — or rather our avatars. Wetherall's

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was the accustomed grinning, overenthusiastic barrel-of-quirks. I'd thought his avatars exaggerated until I met the man and learned they were actually realistic.

Mine was good. I couldn't complain about that. The avatar-modeling program had caught my edges, my impatience and sarcasm. Although I had never smiled that much in my life, at least it hadn't softened me to oatmeal.

There was only one problem.

"Cobble" and "Wetherall" were standing too close together. It looked like their hips were touching behind the podium. And they were flirting, bantering like teenagers, much to the detriment of the spin they were trying to sell.

They positively glowed.

I could see tomorrow's gossip columns as clearly as if they were etched in the air before me.

I opened the interface Wetherall had given me to move "Cobble" to a polite distance, only then she lost the train of her thought. If I was going to take control of my avatar, it seemed that I would have to do all the talking. I couldn't.

I ran up one level and pounded on Wetherall's door. I was doing a lot of that lately.

The door opened. "Hello, Liz — "

"I thought 'Let's-not-and-say-we-did' was supposed to be a mutual decision," I said.

"Eh?"

There was a pix open on the bed. Murk Janglish glowered on it. "Who is it, Ramsdel? Not that Cobble woman again?"

"You're not watching our press conference?" I said.

Wetherall shrugged, "I've been too busy. Murk tells me that my money missed me while I was gone. Besides, we're not really saying anything important, are we? That's the whole point of a press conference."

"Ramsdel," said Janglish, "aim me at her. There's something she needs to hear."

"We may not be saying anything, but our avatars are practically in each other's pants," I said.

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"Really?"

"Come down and take a look."

"Ramsdel!" shouted Janglish. "Wait, Ramsdel. Don't..."

"Hold that thought," said Wetherall, and turned him off.

Down in the media room, Nguyen had broken out the champagne. "This is really quite interesting," he said.

Wetherall watched for a moment. His response was blithe. "I'm sorry Liz, but I'm not at all sure this is bad strategy. If our supposed 'romance' becomes a story, then it will distract the reporters from Thorp. But if you want, I'll call the team leader and get your avatar tweaked right away."

"Mine? What about yours?" From where I sat, it looked like "Wetherall" was trying to peek down "Cobble's" blouse.

"If you insist, I can have my avatars adjusted as well."

"What good is that going to do? The damage is done. The reporters are going to think I'm your mystery woman. We'll be the talk of the net tomorrow."

"They've got me in bed with any woman who gets within ten kilometers. I'm sorry — I'm used to it. Maybe I shouldn't be. But I'll do what I can to spare you the indignity of being thought of as romantically linked to me. Now if you don't mind, Murk is having apoplexy."

Nguyen watched him leave with a detached air of amusement. I turned on him. "What's that smirk about. You look like you're hatching an egg."

"He likes you, Liz."

"Right."

"Liz, when avatars are well done — and remember, it took some time to get yours exact — they're more than just mirrors or puppets. They're out there doing what people are normally too busy to do anymore — playing. Experimenting with possibilities. So these two fell in lust with one another. You can ignore it completely, or you can take note of it — maybe your avatar is telling you something you ought to know. Personally, the chance that that might happen is what's kept me from having one. I'm sure there are some things about myself I would rather not discover."

He took another sip of champagne. "Now, assuming this press conference gets the reporters off our necks for a while, what we need to

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talk about is how we are going to get Queen Jolly Freeze up and flying before the convergence happens."

On the pix, "Cobble" put her hand up to touch "Wetherall" on the arm.

BY THE END of the day everybody in the world knew that the Chinese, Ethiopian, Chilean, and Aussie shitdogs were tunneling to Stateline. Seismologists rushed equipment to Nevada to try to anticipate their arrival. It was generally believed that Thorp's estimate for a simultaneous arrival in fifteen days was ludicrous; reasonable numbers ranged from twenty-one to thirty-five days.

There were calls in Congress to ban everyone from Stateline except for military, but the governor of Nevada — whose hand was, no doubt, deep in Wetherall's pocket — made a fiery speech about states' rights. The reporters vowed to stay right where they were to cover what many claimed was the biggest story in history. Perversely, Wetherall found himself allied with the media against the government in the effort to maintain civilian access to the shitdog site.

Ten days after the convergence had begun, Nguyen had the house ready for flight. There would be no test: this was the official launch even though the mobile base wouldn't be ready for another week. Wetherall had insisted, over Nguyen's objections, that we use the makeshift base we had driven on our shitdog-wrangling test. Queen Jolly Freeze had to be up and running before the rest of the shitdogs arrived.

"When you're ready, Wetherall." The pix softened Nguyen's voice to a whisper.

Overnight the crew had tested all systems and inflated the balloons with helium. In the dawn light, through the skylight, I had watched them swelling over us like huge tumors. Now Wetherall and I were in the control room of Queen Jolly Freeze. Below us, Nguyen in the base directed the ground crew as they worked the mooring lines that had kept the house stable through the inflation. Wetherall's liftmansion was a brobdignagian version of Laputa, an elongated octagon rather than a disk, with four levels, an encircling balcony (despite Wetherall's acrophobia), a small

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gym, sauna, even a hot tub. Every room had its own escape hatch and ladder.

Wetherall decided that none of the crew was necessary. He knew as much about his house as anyone. This was to be a test run for his elusive solitude as well as for Queen Jolly Freeze. I was surprised when he invited me along.

Wetherall was as bright and excited as a kid with seventy million dollars worth of balloons. "I'm going to retract the boom now," he said.

"Go," Nguyen replied from the pix.

The stair boom detached from the base and retracted into the house. The mooring lines fell away. There was an initial jerk as the lifthouse broke free and found its equilibrium. It hovered, neither rising nor falling, ten meters above the base.

"Neutral ballast achieved," Nguyen said. "Electromagnetic tether engaged."

"I'm going to take it up to half altitude," Wetherall said. His hands moved over the controls. Through the observation floor I watched the base gradually shrink below us.

Wetherall stopped the house at sixty meters. In the light northerly breeze, it moved off thirty meters south of the base. The shadows of the big balloons, in the early morning light, were cast against the foot of Pile B a kilometer away.

"Let's have a look at the jewels," Wetherall said.

"Up there you see jewels," Nguyen grumbled. "Down here all I see is shit." He started the base crawling over the salt flats. As the wind was at its back, the house drifted into the lead. Wetherall peered intently at the piles ahead. I retreated to the observation deck on the opposite side of the house to watch for shitdogs.

It was almost over now, and looking down from the balcony, I thought about what the last months had meant. Since that night on the salt flats, Wetherall had treated me with punctilious correctness, retreating into formality like a hurt child. I didn't know why that should have bothered me. But it did.

It was a little chilly outside, and the wind blew back my hopeless hair.

Of course, the media had noticed the lifthouse taking off. They scrambled a dozen copters in pursuit. Wetherall's private little launch

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party was going to be live on the net, very shortly. But I didn't have the chance to tell him. Below, a pair of shitdogs appeared, loping after the base. Nguyen began to turn away from them and the piles but then two more shitdogs approached from the west. Nguyen spotted them, sped up and veered back left. As he did, the left side treads of the base skipped a little ahead, spinning faster than the right ones, though the crawler didn't seem to speed up when it did. The mass of the house, in occasional gusts of wind, was threatening to pull the base off the salt flats. Nguyen had been right; the base wasn't massive enough for Queen Jolly Freeze.

I wondered about the way the four shitdogs had come at us from opposite directions. It was almost as if they were acting in concert. But that didn't make sense, because the effect of their actions was not to chase us away but to steer us toward the piles. Just then I noticed a cloud of dust being kicked up off toward the press encampment. Several vehicles had crossed the property line and were closing on us.

"Wetherall, we've got company," I said.

"I know. There's nothing I can do about the copters, but I'm having security turn those buses around."

"They better. You realize that if we make any sudden turns, your house is going to yank the base off the ground like Piglet in a windstorm."

"What about that, Nguyen?"

He sounded calm. "I told you the mass of this base was inadequate. Of course, a collision with either a shitdog or a bus voids your warranty. However, the shitdogs seem to be dropping back. As long as the wind doesn't pick up, we should be all right. But no heavy breathing, you two."

Copters hovered around Queen Jolly Freeze like gulls around a beached whale. I could see a commentator talking excitedly into his throat mike. I ran out to the rec room and turned on the pix. "...Floating pleasure-palace drifts toward the largest of the alien piles..." A telephoto close-up showed Wetherall at the controls; it made him looked goofier than he really was. "...identity of the woman is still unknown. We have unconfirmed reports that it's pix flame Daphne Overdone, spirited away from the set of the interactive spectacular *Madonna* by special black operatives of Allweather Security, Wetherall's Jolly Freeze subsidiary...."

"Whoa, Nguyen!" said Wetherall. "This is close enough."

The base skidded slowly to a halt. I ran back to Wetherall. We floated

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alongside pile B. The air was thick with the smell of strawberries and chocolate. Outside the window of the observation deck, twenty meters away, were the jewels that crowned the shitpile.

I hadn't been this close to a cluster since we had decapitated Pile A four years ago. Since there's no way to quantify beauty, scientists are supposed to ignore it. But the view of the jewels took my breath away.

There were three main groups. Each consisted of hexagonal rhombohedrons, the largest over three meters in length and almost half a meter in diameter. But the surface of each of the larger jewels was fixed with a myriad of smaller rhombohedrons, and each of those with still smaller ones, in a kind of fractal dance. The colors ranged from the liquid red of garnet, through a fiery gold, to azure, tourmaline and indigo. The morning sunlight reflecting off and refracting through them threw a thousand brilliant highlights.

"This is why I built this house," Wetherall said quietly. "I'm sorry I had to push you around to do it."

"They're beautiful," I said.

Wetherall was silent for a long time. I sat beside him and the two of us watched the jewels bloom as the sun rose. I wondered whether they had any intelligible purpose at all, or were just some chance production of a heap of alien shit. It would be a good joke on all of us — but no more than the beauty of a spiral galaxy, or of the pattern of seeds in a sunflower. Was all this sound and fury, my career in the university, Thorp's career in the media, Nguyen's architectural commission and Wetherall's billions put in service of it, justified by a calm ten minutes at the apex of Pile B? In the end, Wetherall was a pretty sad character. And if he was sad, then what was I, with my academic infighting, the "shitdogs studies community" and coffee for Saintjohn Matthewson?

The light seemed to dance in the corner of my eye and I started to feel that odd feeling again, like I was standing next to myself. As I looked at Liz Cobble, I saw a woman who was very plain indeed — nobody special. It made me ashamed to realize that I had spent my life tarnishing the brilliance I'd been born with. I did not shine. Who would ever be dazzled by me?

Of course, I knew exactly when it had all begun. At the nurse's station in the ICU of St. Anne's hospital. The smiley nurse with the hair thick as

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rubber bands wanted to give me a lollipop. I didn't want a lollipop. I was eight years old and my mother was dying and I was going to have to live the rest of my life with my two aunts, who dressed strange and smelled funny and never had anything to eat in their house.

"Here, take it honey," the nurse said. It was purple. Of course she didn't know that I hated purple lollipops. "We only give them to special little girls."

"I don't want to be special," little Lizzy Cobble had said. "I want to go home."

She was such a stubborn little girl.

"Liz, does it seem to you that they're glowing?"

Wetherall's words roused me from my orgy of self-reproach. At first I thought it was just the angle of the sun, then I realized that Wetherall was right. The jewels were beginning to glow.

"Has anyone spotted this phenomenon before?" Wetherall asked.

"It's not in the literature," I said. "We need to get closer. This could be a breakthrough."

"You think it's some sort of radioactivity?"

"I doubt it. There's nothing in their chemical composition that..."

Nguyen interrupted us.

"Wetherall, we've got problems."

"What?" Wetherall asked.

"Actually at least a hundred problems. Thorp has come to visit — with some friends."

I ran out to the balcony to see. One of the buses had gotten through and had pulled up beside the base. A crowd was boiling out. People threw themselves on the ground in front of the treads of the base. Thorp, wearing a severe black suit and a wide straw hat, directed them with a bullhorn. When the base was surrounded on three sides he turned the horn up toward Queen Jolly Freeze.

"WETHERALL!" his amplified voice boomed. "MAKE THIS FOOL PULL YOUR HOUSE BACK FROM THE JEWELS. YOU DON'T REALIZE THE DANGER YOU'RE PUTTING US ALL IN — THE WHOLE HUMAN RACE! YOU WERE CRAZY TO TRY TO REPLACE ME WITH THAT WOMAN — SHE DOESN'T KNOW A THING ABOUT

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THESE CREATURES. PULL BACK BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE!"

Nguyen had climbed down from the cab of the base to argue with Thorp. He gesticulated wildly, pointing off across the flats where the fifth shitdog had joined its four fellows. They crouched all in a line; I had never seen anything like it. Their pattern seemed deeply meaningful.

The copters dropped down low. Their backwash jostled the Queen Jolly Freeze. I could see telephotos on Thorp. This was his moment in the sun; I hoped the old loon was sweating.

Wetherall switched on the house's PA system and leaned into the microphone. "Dr. Thorp, you are trespassing on private property. Gather your people together and leave before we call in the authorities."

"YOU'RE TOYING WITH DISASTER. ALREADY, BECAUSE OF YOUR ACTIVITIES, SHITDOGS FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD ARE GATHERING HERE. NOW YOU'RE GOING TO SET OFF THE BEACON, AND BEFORE YOU KNOW IT THE BIG DOGS WILL BE HERE!"

I leaned over and grabbed the microphone. I decided not to mention anything about the jewels beginning to glow. "Thorp, you microcephalic poser! What are you babbling about? If you think — "

"Liz," said Wetherall. He pointed.

Thorp, and Nguyen and the crowd of protesters all turned their heads in the same direction, as if they were connected to servos. The effect was impressive. Once they saw the five shitdogs that were marching in a line toward the base, however, the illusion of unity vanished.

Nguyen dashed for the cab. A dozen protesters did the same, crowding in with him as Nguyen tried to get the thing moving again. Those who didn't fit hung off the sides. But most of the others were still lying on the ground, and there was no room to maneuver. Thorp stood calmly in place while the panic-stricken swirled around him. He raised the bullhorn. "DON'T WORRY." His voice crackled. "THEY MEAN US NO HARM. THIS IS PART OF THE PLAN."

"What is he doing?" I asked Wetherall. "I'm going down there."

"With those lunatics? No. Besides we're too high."

"Then reel in the tether. I need to get down, Wetherall. Right now!"

"No, Liz."

I stared at him. Who did he think he was, telling me what to do? I ran down to the bottom floor, overrode the locks and popped the hatch.

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Thanks to the breeze, the house was floating to the south of the base, and forty meters below lay the edge where the castings pile met the salt flats. Off to the north thirty meters, the protesters boiled around the base truck — most of them. Here and there in the crowd was one who stood stock still, like Thorp, as if dazed.

I threw the emergency ladder over the edge and it unrolled to within a couple of meters of the ground. Close enough — I swung my legs over the edge, and, clutching the ladder white-knuckled, began to climb down.

"Liz, no!" I heard Wetherall shout from above me.

Derring-do is harder in real life than in the gropies. Looking down made me want to throw up, so I didn't. I tried to fix on the horizon. The breeze caught the ladder and I began to describe a long, lazy ellipse approximately ten stories off the ground. Meanwhile, the shifting of my weight as I moved from rung to rung made the ladder twist. I began to wonder if maybe I was as crazy as Thorp. At least he had two feet on the ground. A copter came over to watch me and my clothes flapped like angry birds. The base moved a few meters and then jerked to a stop.

I almost lost my grip. "Nice driving, Nguyen," I muttered, and looked down. Only it wasn't Nguyen driving at all. He had been thrown from the cab by protestors and was only now scrambling back on.

Just in front of the base truck, a circle of the salt flat was boiling and churning. The center of the patch fell away, and a pair of blue legs poked out. It was a shitdog, hatching from the desert like a baby dinosaur. But that was impossible; all five shitdogs were marching in formation on the stranded base.

I froze on the ladder. I was suddenly dizzy, and it wasn't only because I was doing a high wire act without a net.

Another pair of claws burst through the salt crust, then another. All around the piles shitdogs erupted from the desert.

Someone had forgotten to give them a copy of the schedule. Convergence was happening early. Within minutes we would be dealing not just with five shitdogs, but with twenty-five.

Most of the protestors broke ranks now, scattering in every direction, throwing themselves onto the base, although quite a few still remained by Thorp's side. The base was backing away, or attempting to, its treads

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spinning against the resistance of the massive lifthouse. The ladder twisted and jerked. I wrapped my legs around the rung and twisted my arms in the rope, clinging for my life like Dejah Thoris, six stories above an approaching horde of alien creatures that smelled like lilacs. But the thing that surprised me the most was that I wanted to climb down more than ever. It was as if the shitdogs were calling me.

I wondered how long it would take before whoever was driving the base realized the only way they were going to get moving would be to kill the electro-magnetic tether.

Not long at all.

The house shot up about ten meters before it re-established neutral ballast. I yo-yoed beneath it on the ladder. We were drifting with the wind over the shitpile. Below, the assembled shitdogs bellowed up at me, and radiated in toward the pile.

"Hang on, Liz!" Wetherall's voice boomed from the house's loudspeakers. I looked up and saw him out on the balcony. He had gotten out his smart lasso and was twirling it over his head, legs bent and braced. The jewels were glowing so brightly now that it was hard to look at them. In the shadow of the house's roof, Wetherall's face was awash in their light. He threw the lasso at the jewels and missed, falling short by a meter or two. The electric rope snapped itself upward and hovered in the air like a cobra, awaiting its next command. The wind was blowing us away from the shitpile. Wetherall tried again, and this time the lasso caught the jewels. He lashed the other end of the smart rope to the railing of the house, and dashed inside, to reappear at the open hatch.

Wetherall gulped, then slid awkwardly over the edge and started down to me. His eyes were the size of eggs. I couldn't watch him watch the ground so I looked down again. All twenty-five shitdogs had formed two roughly concentric circles beneath me. A target. And they were calling to me. They wanted me, Liz Cobble, the queen of shitdog studies.

"Liz, don't move," Wetherall called. "I'm coming."

The only thought in my head was, he's trying to stop me. I had to get away from him. I made myself move down the ladder.

The base scuttled across the flats under a black swarm of protesters. Thorp's bus was gone, leaving a score or more protesters behind, among them Thorp. One of the pix copter pilots, braver than the others, landed

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and waved to the stragglers to jump aboard. But they ignored him. Thorp turned the bullhorn on him. "THAT'S OKAY. WE HAVE EVERYTHING UNDER CONTROL," he said. Then he dropped the bullhorn at his feet, and he and the others started toward the gathering shitdogs.

I saw him brush a hand along an aquamarine-colored flank, and I was jealous. It wasn't *fair!* Heedless now of the risk of falling, I scrambled down. Wetherall was shouting at me. I don't even know what he said.

Thorp came to the center of the shitdog formation, held his arms out and turned around twice, as if to embrace them all. A shitdog approached him and then settled back on its haunches. He walked toward it, smiling. The jewels were glowing so furiously now that their prismatic colors rained down on the the shitdogs and Thorp's followers like God's own grace. My head swam with the scent of roses. God-damned *Thorp!* Tears welled in my eyes. *I* had looked into the jewels' heart. The shitdogs had called to *me.*

I was supposed to be special.

I was about to let go of the ladder and drop to the ground when Wetherall reached me and seized my arm.

The lead shitdog lifted up its front legs. Its arms extended outward in an embrace, claws sliding from its feet like those of a cat. The embrace took in Thorp, who stood, arms lifted. Clumsy as a baby, the shitdog grabbed Thorp between its paws, lifted him to its mouth and bit his head off.

All I could think of was how lucky he was.

Thorp's followers were going where their leader had gone before them, falling into the eager embrace of the shitdogs, being torn to pieces and eaten. I struggled to get free of Wetherall, but he wrapped his legs around me and would not let me go. We twisted on the ladder. The wind bore the house around to the side of the castings pile, the ladder jerked downward, and Wetherall and I dropped the last few meters to the salt flats. I tried to get free of him, but was knocked dizzy by the fall. By the time I got my wind, the shitdogs were done feeding.

The jewels stopped glowing.

When I shook my head, little black mites twirled into nothingness. For a moment I couldn't remember who I was or why I was there. I watched uncomprehendingly as the shitdogs settled down among the bloody scraps of Thorp's followers and went to sleep.

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"Liz, are you okay?" said Wetherall.

The sound of my name snapped me back from wherever I had been. "Why? Why did you stop me? It was supposed to be me, not Thorp!"

"I love you, Liz."

I blinked at him, the goofy billionaire. Then I looked up at Queen Jolly Freeze. Wetherall was afraid of heights. How the hell had he climbed down that ladder?

ALTOGETHER, THE twenty-five shitdogs consumed twenty-five of Thorp's people, twelve men and thirteen women. They then fell into a coma-like sleep. During the next forty-eight hours, the world watched as they shriveled and deflated. The Joint Chiefs advocated nuking them before they awoke. I was in the camp that said it would be a crime against the universe to destroy the aliens over what was clearly a human-caused tragedy. Wetherall pointed out that Thorp's people were trespassing on private lands, had been warned of the dangers involved, and had voluntarily offered themselves for consumption. He never mentioned that I'd been prepared to do the same, and I was grateful to him for keeping that quiet.

About the time Wetherall and I were being picked up by Nguyen and Janglish, Wetherall's smart rope lost power. Queen Jolly Freeze came unmoored, floated majestically across the flats before a stiff, hot breeze that smelled of fresh-baked oatmeal bread. Ten hours later it wrapped itself around Deseret Peak in the Stansbury Mountains of Utah and was totally destroyed.

The debate about what to do about the dogs was still raging when, three days later, they awoke.

The report that the shitdogs were stirring came while Wetherall, Nguyen, Janglish and I were sitting in the lounge of Laputa, going over the wreckage of Wetherall's plans and trying to figure out what came next. Wetherall seemed surprisingly sanguine about the destruction of Queen Jolly Freeze. When I asked him about it, he only said, "I don't need it anymore."

Nguyen and Janglish had established some sort of alliance aimed at getting Wetherall back to his business interests. And they were holding

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hands. They made a strange couple; I wondered how they'd fare once the nosegays wore off. In any event, I guess I'd figured out the gory details of Nguyen O'Hara's erotic life.

Me, I was thinking about whether I could face going back to the university after everything that had happened. Back to bored undergrads and faculty meetings run by the likes of Saintjohn Matthewson. Much as I had complained, inwardly and outwardly, about the way Wetherall had deranged my life, I wasn't sure I wanted it to be ranged again.

Also, the shitdogs were the biggest news in the world of science since Playdough Theory. As the sapientologist with the most experience on the ground, so to speak, I wasn't going to leave until I knew what was going on.

"Let's go," I said.

"Uh..." Nguyen said. "Considering their last interaction with humans, I'm not sure I want to be there when they take up activities again, thank you. Besides, we have issues to resolve with Wetherall."

"That's fine," I said. "I don't blame you. But I'm a scientist."

"I'm coming too," Wetherall said.

"There's no need — " I started.

"Considering *your* behavior during the last shitdog interaction with humans, I think there is," Wetherall said.

I didn't argue. We grabbed a jeep and motored over to Pile B. It was the first time we had been alone together since we'd been picked up on the salt flats. I felt nervous, as if we were both expecting me to say something. I took my eyes off the horizon to look at him. He squinted against the bright sunlight, the wind blowing his hair. He looked his age, which I had discovered was forty-two.

"The place will be lousy with media," I said.

"I don't care."

I concentrated on driving. Amid the talk that he was responsible for the death of Thorp's followers, he had faced hordes of questioning reporters — without his avatars.

"I haven't forgotten what you said when you stopped me from getting eaten," I told him.

"Please — I don't expect you to say anything. You already told me how you feel about me."

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"That was an example of the narcissism of minor differences."

"The *what*?"

"Never mind. Things change."

There were several seconds of silence. We were coming up on the cordon of weaponry and troop carriers the army had thrown up around the site. I kept my eyes on it, my heart thumping while I waited for Wetherall's response. Finally I snuck a peek at him.

He was looking right at me, wearing the same goofy, astonished smile his avatar had flashed during his first call to my university office. "Change is scary," he said. Then he laughed out loud. "Ask Murk Janglish."

We reached the checkpoint. Wetherall had brought enough financial and political pressure to bear to insure us a hearing when the time came; now I watched him discuss quietly with the nervous officer in charge why our presence — in particular mine — was appropriate at this crucial moment. Wetherall seemed quite as adept at persuasion in person as he was by avatar. We passed through the perimeter to the place where the sleeping dogs lay.

In the days since what the press was calling the Big Thorp Massacre, the shitdogs had been undergoing some sort of transformation. They'd exuded fluids, and lost a considerable portion of their mass. Some were of the opinion that human flesh was poisonous to them and the dogs were dying. I wasn't convinced. The last confrontation had been so purposeful, on both sides. And I could not discount my own compulsion to converge.

The dog that had eaten Thorp was the first to rise. After baking in the hot sun for days, it shuddered, then staggered to all fours. Its legs had become more elongated and slender, and the paws more handlike, with three fingers and an opposable thumb. As it sat up, quivering, I saw that its neck was also longer, its brow higher.

The soldiers drew back. There was a clank of weapons brought to the ready when the dog rose onto its hind legs. It shook its head, opened its eyes, then looked down at itself, and raised its big blue paw before its face. "My God!" it said. "I've got my hand back!"

The soldiers prepared to fire. Wetherall pulled me back. The creature lowered its hand and regarded us with a clear intelligence.

"No need for the guns, boys," it said. "Dr. Blaine Thorp here. Let me explain to you what's going on."

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* * *

The shitdogs were biological message devices. They were sent by an alien race which the Thorp-creature still called the Big Dogs and which had been spreading throughout the galaxy for millennia. When the shitdogs landed their potential lay dormant — they were little more than the feeding and excreting machines they had seemed to be. Their initial programming was to set up the shit piles and jewels. If intelligent creatures existed on a world they visited, such creatures would, the Big Dogs believed, be drawn to the jewels. Of course, other sorts of creatures might be attracted as well, and the Big Dogs didn't want to waste time on squirrels and turtles. The shitdogs' barking and avoidance behavior were the first line of defense, but the Big Dogs needed a more pervasive disincentive.

So the shitdogs were designed to analyze the local biology and produce the vilest smell imaginable. The assumption was that virtually all carbon-based life would have senses responsive to chemical stimuli, and that only intelligence would ignore a horrific stink for nothing more tangible than curiosity. Only intelligence would grasp that ten percent beauty was well worth ninety percent shit. And so only a long series of interactions, cumulatively proving the intelligence of the curious creatures, would trigger the next phase.

Attraction, first by semiotic manipulation, and at the climax by direct stimulation of the limbic system. Those most fascinated by the shitdogs would be the likely candidates for consumption. After they were eaten, the dogs would analyze the genetic makeup of those ingested, modify themselves correspondingly, and incorporate memory RNA from their supper.

So we faced a group of twenty-five Big Dog aliens, their own intellects fully activated, but incorporating the memories and knowledge of the humans they'd gobbled, and thus able to understand human society, to communicate, to function as participants in the human world.

Much to my dismay, the brand-new Big Dogs also got the personalities of those they'd devoured. So the world is being forced to deal with a set of super-intelligent aliens, with knowledge of the universe that dwarfs our own, led by a creature that just happens to have the character of Blaine Thorp.

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He's been awfully nice to me, all things considered. And why not? He lost every battle and still won the war. He's the most brilliant chiropractor in the universe and he knows it. Thorp Dog has even asked me to head up the human liaison team. So obviously having his IQ boosted to Epsilon Eridani has taught him *something.*

I have Wetherall to thank for this, except that I still can't decide what to do with him. Murk Janglish was right, after all. I guess I've sunk my hooks into him.

I'm just not sure whether I should keep him or throw him back.

Tonight on *Eye,* critic-at-large Dennis Ngomo takes a first look at architect Nguyen O'Hara's controversial plans for building Convergence World. Are the piles built by the former shitdogs an appropriate site for a water slide theme park? Dennis will put that very question to O'Hara and his lawyer, Murk Janglish, in a few moments.

Later today, *America, America*'s own Penelope Hunt sits down with alien leader Blaine Thorpdog, who reminisces about his boyhood in Iowa and explains the principles of faster-than-light travel.

This week on *ProfitWeek* our panel of experts considers the future of frozen desserts in general and Jolly Freeze Corp in particular, in the wake of the biggest rollout of an ice cream flavor in history, Luscious Lizberry.

Coming up on *Hemisphere Confidential Report:* we bring you a shocking exclusive on Ramsdel Wetherall's latest sexual fetish. Our I-team of undercover nanobots have caught Wetherall with yet another unidentified beauty, believed to be gropie diva Jillian Jalapeno. Sources close to Ms. Jalapeno have denied that she has accepted the island of Grenada as an engagement present. Stay tuned for extremely unauthorized footage of the reclusive billionaire and his latest mystery woman *jumping on beds.*

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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

BEYOND THE MAGPIE IMPULSE

ARTISTS ARE thieves. Okay, maybe that's a bit harsh. They are magpies that snatch, store, and reproduce glittering cultural fragments that they collect from the four corners of their lives. A writer is particularly adept at this type of scavenging. The neuroses of parents and siblings, brilliant phrases from favorite authors, bizarre scenarios from the evening news, and even overheard conversations from laundromats and diners are all source material for them.

And if the writer is also a filmmaker? Well then, the tendency to extract is even more apparent, since it's not just words but also images that inform their art. A particular "school" of painting, print ads, comic books, familiar locales, and, of course, the works of earlier filmmakers all get requisitioned and absorbed into the job at hand.

There's no crime in doing this.... Well, *sometimes* there *is*, but that's the concern of lawyers, judges, and juries. More often, it merely gives film scholars and fan[atic]s something to hash over during seminars and newsgroup exchanges.

Call it homage or call it unintentional plagiarism. Either way, I truly believe that the magpie impulse is unavoidable in moviemaking. Yet it is nonetheless increasingly problematic in the movies we see. For most of today's directors and screenwriters just don't know what to do with the oddments they manage to gather. While a *good* film is able to meld scores of elements into a cinematic experience that seems unique and deeply satisfying, most contemporary movies are just a jumble of elements that never coalesce into a whole.

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These ruminations came to me while I watched the recent sf hit, *The Matrix*. The film never quite comes together, but it's not for want of some fascinating elements. The Wachowski brothers, Andy and Larry (*Bound*), have obviously read a lot of books and seen a lot of television and movies. They ransack them all to make *The Matrix*. I can't name everything they "sample" in this, their second feature, but a few obvious influences are *Blade Runner*, the Bible, *Alice in Wonderland*, Japanese manga and anime, *Men in Black*, Hong Kong chopsocky flicks, classic sf fiction from authors like Dick, Ellison, and William Gibson, *Alien/s*, *The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai*, Greek mythology, *Terminator* and *T2*, the *Millennium Falcon* set from *Star Wars*, and the old *Kung Fu* TV show.

I certainly wouldn't have minded the movie's use of so many disparate elements had the sibling writer-directors managed to cook up a cohesive and original film from them. Unfortunately, they do not.

Keanu Reeves (who has never looked lovelier) stars in *The Matrix* as a software programmer named Thomas Anderson. By day, he is a corporate drone. By night, he is a hacker called Neo who deals in contraband. When he starts getting messages from mysterious figures named Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss) and Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne), he also sparks the malevolent interest of black-suited enforcement officers, including the brutal Agent Smith (Hugo Weaving).

Smith wants to use Neo as bait to capture Morpheus, whom the authorities consider "the most dangerous man alive." But Neo is drawn to the dignified and courageous Morpheus — especially since he wears cool threads and serious shades, and seems to think that Mr. Anderson is "the One" Morpheus has been seeking all his life. How flattering! And undoubtedly true. Anyone with half a brain for anagrams can tell that Neo *is* the One. So, young Thomas's self-doubts, and the misinformation that the film throws out from time to time to challenge Neo's role as the chosen one, are obvious red herrings.

Neo is real deal, born to fight humankind's holy war against the AI machine oppressors that view people as nothing more than a handful of copper-top batteries.

My question is, why *is* Neo the One? Admittedly, Keanu played Siddhartha in *Little Buddha* a few years back, and he looks very sexy (if not at all spiritual) in a long black coat and jack-boots. He says

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"Whoaah!" with such dumbfounded élan, too! But does that a messiah make? Trinity seems to have the same physical prowess as Neo, and by movie's end, she's even displayed a singular talent for raising the dead — Neo, no less — through the power of a kiss she delivers in another dimension.

How come she can't be the Messiah? Oh, that's right, she's just a girl. There to kiss the boy, and look *really good* in a rubber dominatrix catsuit, but not to Save the World.

Saving mankind is men's work, I guess. So why not give the brave and brilliant Morpheus the job? As I watched Laurence Fishburne go through his paces as Neo's guru cum John the Baptist, I was repeatedly disheartened. Fishburne is so good, and so charismatic. He gives the impression of a man of unlimited power who keeps the full extent of his wizardry in check so as not to scare the horses, and the ordinary humans around him. And the Wachowskis make full use of this actor's underplayed might.

Like some superfly superman, Morpheus leaps from building to building in a single bound. He is ever calm, and seemingly omniscient. Morpheus is the pirate Master, and Neo is but his callow acolyte. When Fishburne imparts wisdom like "[t]here is a difference between knowing the path, and walking the path" to his student, you almost expect him to add the endearment "grasshopper" to each pronouncement. He da *man!* So why can't *he* be the messiah?

He's the right gender. So it must be his color. By decree of the conventional Hollywood script, black actors are guaranteed roles as sidekicks and spirit guides in Hollywood movies, but the messianic roles are off limits. Since the Wachowski brothers claim to be breaking new ground in their movie, part of me wishes the filmmakers had had the foresight and courage to Do the Right Thing and make Fishburne's Morpheus the Savior he was so clearly meant to play. But another part of me wonders why we need some Judeo-Christian messiah in the first place.

Significant social change requires collective action, and not just some demigod dude who decides that he's going to apply his newfound magnificence to the problem at hand. And, in *The Matrix*, what does deific dynamism actually consist of, anyway? That's the saddest part of all! In the case of Neo, his higher power is nothing more than superior firepower.

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"Guns, lots of guns," is what our cyber-christ orders up for the final showdown with the 'droid agents of the machine-controlled world. And when Neo starts shooting, he doesn't want to stop.

As I watched Keanu run through lobbies and hallways in his long black coat spraying thousands of bullets upon other humans, I couldn't help but be haunted by the concurrent news story of the latest school massacre, perpetrated by two young lads in long black coats who decided to solve their adolescent angst with bullets and bombs.

I'm not saying that *The Matrix* caused those boys in Littleton to slaughter their own kind. But I *am* saying that it's a pathetic cop-out for this film — one its filmmakers claim as "intellectual" fare with "deeper meaning" and religious overtones — to end up with the same old blood-n-guts bang-bang young people get from every other action film, comic, and video game they absorb. Forget about pushing lofty ideas. *The Matrix* ends up pushing the envelope the same way every other actioner tries to, by making new strides in state-of-the-art bloodletting.

To this end, John Gaeta and his crews developed some really spiffy "flow-mo" shots for the film; much more extensive and elaborate than the brief examples we've gotten in the past from ads like those for Gap khakis. The Wachowskis call this FX breakthrough technique "bullet-time photography" since it allows characters to move at the same speed as fired ammo. Cool! (And creepy.)

If *The Matrix* was going to degrade into standard action, I wish that it would, at least, have spent more time on the balletic martial arts scenes choreographed by the great Hong Kong fight designer, Yuen Wo Ping. The wire-stunt work and Kung Fu routines he created — and which the cast spent four months perfecting — are truly beautiful to watch. Here, a power greater than metal ordnance is glimpsed. As characters flip, leap, and run up walls, they seem to have brought the force of their minds and spirits to a place where their bodies can defy the (artificially imposed) laws of physics.

If the Wachowskis explored the mind-body connection of martial arts a bit more, and de-emphasized the bullet-body connection of the standard shoot-em-up a bit less, they might have convinced me that their movie was of "intellectual" value. But, probably not. For when you take the blood spatters and the ex-

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ploding helicopter away from *The Matrix*, nothing of substance remains. The flying bodies hold your interest while you watch them, but if you try to make some sense of the mumbo-jumbo the characters spout, you'll only end up confused and frustrated.

In the end, the Wachowski boys have "borrowed" bits from here, there, and everywhere, and they have ended up creating a two hour and fifteen minute jumble of cultural and philosophical references with violence to spare, but precious little clarity or logic.

I found the hodgepodge of *The Matrix*, its box office success, and the self-proclaimed visionary nature of its plot and themes, especially maddening because it isn't half as good as a very similar film released a year earlier. That film was called *Dark City*, and it was directed by Alex Proyas *(The Crow)* and written by Proyas, with Lem Dobbs and David S. Goyer.

In *Dark City*, too, humanity shares a collective delusion, orchestrated by an alien force. Here, the aliens are called Strangers, and they are a dying race from another corner of the universe. Disguised in the cadavers of human dead, the Strangers (with the help of an enslaved human scientist, played by Kiefer Sutherland) seek to understand and capture the vital force of the human soul. They think that remembrance is the key, and so they erase and remix human memories (and hence, human lives) each night.

The populace of this nameless Noir city are nothing more than lab animals. And yet, their essential spirit remains a sacred mystery that the Strangers cannot control. Worse, the aliens soon learn of a man who has seen through the illusion of their society, by remaining wide awake during their nightly ("tuning") experiments. His name is John Murdoch (Rufus Sewell), and he has somehow acquired the Strangers' telepathic powers.

Armed with the oppressor's skills, John Murdoch wants, at first, only to comprehend and escape the Orwellian horrors of his night-locked city, and find an elusive lost paradise called Shell Beach. He is, like Neo, a reluctant messiah, who eventually uses his mind and heart (instead of a small arsenal) to defend himself and all of humankind.

Real artistic vision fills every frame of *Dark City*. Yes, Alex Proyas was influenced by his cultural precursors. Everything from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* to 1950's

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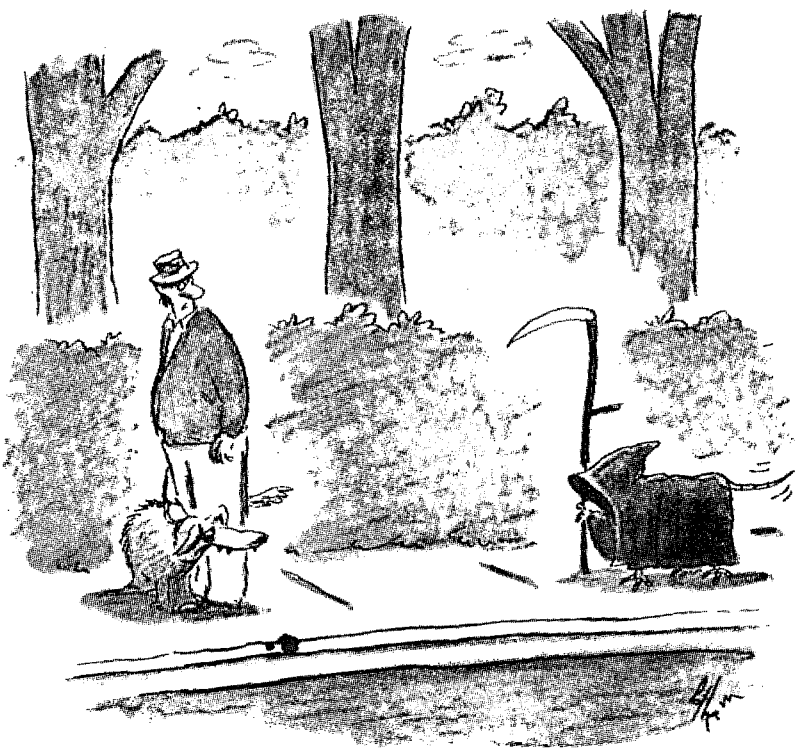
Hollywood film noir to French graphic novels to Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* bear upon his film. But Proyas is more than a petty thief. He is an alchemist who has taken countless cultural fragments and the fruits of his own imagination and created something rare and very valuable from them.

If, for some reason, you have yet to see *Dark City*, do not hesitate to rent, tune in, or purchase it. It is one of the finest science fiction films of recent memory. *The Matrix* isn't even worth wasting a free rental coupon on. It is a cluttered and coarse ragbag of a movie made by magpies...and studio executives. ☙



"I don't think it's me he wants."

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Mary Turzillo lives in Ohio with her husband of many months (they exchanged vows in April), fellow sf writer Geoff Landis. Her stories have appeared in Asimov's, SF Age, Universe 3, *and* Interzone, *as well as in these pages—her last appearance here was the modern dragon tale "Chrysoberyl" in our June '98 issue. This new one is a different sort of animal entirely, a transatlantic fantasy from two centuries past concerning the value of a man's oath.*

By Ben Cruachan

By Mary A. Turzillo

THE LAD, HIS GREATCOAT drenched, ice clinging to his hair and lashes, brought the cold smell of sleet into the castle hall with him. "I beg hospitality of the laird, if you are he," the lad said, his voice wee as a bairn's.

Duncan motioned for his manservant to build up the fire. "I'm Laird Campbell, and do you think I would turn away a stranger?"

The lad nodded, not taking his huge, frightened eyes off Duncan.

"Bring hot porridge, whiskey, and a straw tick," said Duncan to the manservant. Both he and the manservant were muzzy, pulled out of sound sleep by the pounding on the door. "Why are you on the road in such weather?"

"Men track me like an animal," said the lad. "I've run these ten miles, and if I go a step further, I shall fall down in the cold and sleep forever."

"Give me your wet clothes," said Duncan, "and take this plaid to wrap around you. You may sleep before the fire if you wish."

The lad flinched away from Duncan, but surrendered his sodden

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greatcoat, smelling of wet wool, and took the plaid. The manservant had brought a bowl of oats fragrant with added whiskey, and the lad ate it in neat, quick spoonsful.

"Why should they make an outlaw of so young a lad, bonnie as you are?"

"I have gone afoul of a powerful laird." The lad sank down by the fire and closed his dark eyes. "Laird Duncan, I beg a boon."

"Ask your boon, lad, and I'll give it."

"Swear to take me under your protection."

"It is sworn, lad."

"By Ben Cruachan, swear."

The mountain? Ben Cruachan was the sight he saw always from his home. It was beloved ground. But he had already sworn. "By Ben Cruachan, then, if you must."

The lad pulled the plaid over his shoulders and sank down on the straw tick, turning away from Duncan.

Duncan dreamt hideous dreams that night. His cousin Donald, to whose sister Elizabeth he was betrothed, came in the dream and addressed him sternly, saying he had said what he should not have said, and done ill by him who was to be his brother-in-law. Duncan woke in a cold sweat and dozed only fitfully the rest of the night.

At dawn, Duncan's bagpiper — for Duncan kept a piper in defiance of the ban — woke the household with a military air, "Are You Waking Yet, Johnny Cope?" and then played a sad song, "The Flowers of the Forest Have Faded Away," which always made Duncan think of his father's funeral. His father had been dear to him, and he remembered strolling with him during that last spring, plucking sprigs of forget-me-not, Jacob's ladder, and primrose for the lasses.

But the piper's wail put courage back in Duncan's heart; forgetting his ill dreams, he went down to greet his guest. The youth was up and neatly dressed, looking less like a drowned cat than the night before. A comely lad, younger than Duncan himself, whose father's death had made him laird when he was scarcely a man. The lad's fresh complexion and dark, flashing eyes pleased Duncan, as did his elegant manners.

"What may be your name, that you ask hospitality of the Campbells?"

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"I am Angus Stewart." The lad looked bashfully away. The Stewarts were on ill terms with the Campbells, and Duncan frowned. He immediately regretted taking in this child of discord.

But he was a man of honor, and so sent for bannocks and tea with milk before questioning Angus Stewart further.

"May I know your crime?" he asked, as soon as was civil.

Angus looked Duncan in the eye. "I killed a man in a fair fight. He had insulted my honor. Please — " Angus held up a hand, "remember your pledge."

"You extracted this promise from me by trickery," said Duncan thoughtfully, "but if your cause was honorable, I am bound by it."

Angus fell to his knees and kissed Duncan's hand. "I shall do you whatever service you wish, if you will shelter me."

Duncan, come so recently to his title, was embarrassed. Such toadying was unmanly, and if the lad was to stay, he would have to learn better ways. It was unseemly to ask a lad not much younger than he himself to work for his keep, yet noble lads — Duncan felt sure Angus was of noble birth — often did menial, hard labor.

"I trust you know horse grooming?"

"My Laird, I would serve you by playing the pipes."

An odd request, but Duncan called old Andrew, his piper, and asked that the Stewart lad be instructed along with young Andrew, the piper's son.

All day long, as Duncan went over his accounts before the fire, he heard tunes played: "Carls w' the Breeks," "The Old Sword's Lament," and "The Fried Periwig." Angus had some knowledge, it seemed, for it was only by listening closely that Duncan could hear when the tune was played by the master, and when by young Angus.

Daylight brightened, the storm abated, and a man beat on Duncan's gate: old Robert Campbell, his uncle who was to be his father-in-law.

Robert Campbell strode into the hall and tore off his bonnet. "You harbor one who has spilled blood, Duncan Campbell, and you must give the murderer up."

In the far corner of the castle, Duncan could hear the bagpipe lessons going on: "The Bells of Perth." The skirl of the practice chanter made the hair of his neck suddenly stand on end. He rose and with two strides was at the mantel where his claymore lay.

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"I have sworn protection to the killer."

Robert put his hand to his own claymore. "Then I fear you've done unwisely, Duncan, and it shall go ill with you when you come to fetch Elizabeth as your bride. The one you shelter has murdered Donald, your own cousin."

Horror and confusion rose in Duncan's heart, but he had given his word. He said,"Be that as it is. My word is my bond." His hand tightened on the claymore.

"You will regret that pledge," said Robert.

Duncan stood in the open door and watched Robert mount and ride away in the freezing rain.

Duncan's anger boiled within him. Angus Stewart had made him give his word, after killing his cousin and his friend, the man who was brother to his beloved! He strode into the chamber where old Andrew instructed the lad, and curtly dismissed his piper.

"What do you mean, seeking the oath of the cousin of the man you killed?" he said.

"I have done nothing — "

Duncan struck the lad on the cheek, knocking him backward into the wall.

Young Stewart sank to his knees before Duncan and tore open his shirt.

Duncan staggered backward. No flat chest, hairy as a man's or smooth as a boy's, was revealed beneath that shirt, but two full, bonny breasts as ripe as September apples.

"Do what you will with me," said the stranger, "but remember your pledge."

Duncan raked a hand through his beard. "What manner of creature are you?"

"I am a lass," said young Stewart. "My true name is Annie, and I disguised myself in man's dress." She fluffed out her dark hair, bit her lips and flushed, and he marveled how he could ever have thought her a lad.

"Well, cover yourself," Duncan said, feeling the color creep over his own face.

Instead she reached her arms out. "Remember your pledge! Donald

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your cousin tried to ravish me, and I defended myself as a good woman ought. I didn't mean to kill him, but my wee knife slipped."

Duncan turned his eyes away, but the lass seized his hands and pressed them to her lips. He could feel the heat of her bosom, smell her skin, and he was moved by dark passions. "This must be a lie," he said. "Donald was a mild man, married to the bonniest lass in Inverawe save my own beloved. He cannot have tried to ravish you."

She sobbed, "I swear to you, by Ben Cruachan, and by St. Andrew."

"You are free with oaths, lass." Duncan tried halfheartedly to pull his hand away.

"See these bruises on my neck and bosom," she said. "I got them in defense of my maidenhead."

Duncan looked, as she opened the shirt further and displayed a few faint marks, one on the base of her throat, and another near her roseblush nipple. He was always a passionate man, and in his anger, the sight stirred him.

"Honor your word," she said in a wee voice.

Duncan jerked his hand away. "Stay far from my piper and my other people," he said. "Robert will be back. I do na doubt that he went to get his other sons."

Then he seized her hand and dragged her back into the hall. There, he called for a servant to make up a bundle of bread, whiskey, and woolen rugs. "I know of a cave where I played when I was a lad," said Duncan. "Robert will not find you there." And when she hesitated, "Come. Darkness is falling and the way will be treacherous for the horse."

All the way to the cave they rode Duncan's fine mare, Annie Stewart riding astride in her lad's clothes, her arms around Duncan. When Duncan lifted her down in the cold dark, he smelled her hair, fragrant despite her hard dealings.

"I shall freeze here," she said.

"Do na think of making a fire," Duncan said. "I can leave you the one rug. Wrap tight in it and stay deep in the cave."

She held out her arms to him. "Warm me before you go."

Duncan knew well that she was enticing him, this murderer of his bride's brother, but he went to her, lay on the thick woolen rug with her and wrapped it around them. "You'll be warm enough with a nip of whiskey," he said.

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She held him the tighter, wrapping narrow, strong arms about his waist. She did not seem cold; indeed her thinly covered bosom pressed against his chest with feverish heat.

"That's enough, lass," he said. "You'll be warm enough till morning. Then you can move around and stir your blood."

She buried her face in the hollow of his neck. Her hair fell silkily across his cheek, and the odor of her sweat stirred him.

"Your arms are strong," she said in a low husky tone. "I wish it had been you instead of Donald."

Despite her wiles, desire rose in him, unquiet and harsh. He asked, "What do you want with me?"

"Swear to protect me, Duncan. Swear by Ben Cruachan, on your dirk." She reached down and took his dirk from its sheath. The dirk, shaped like Christ's cross, betokened a man's honor. Placing it against her bosom, she took his hand and pressed against it. "Swear."

"I've sworn," he said.

"Again."

"Yes, yes, I swear!"

He lay longer with her, and her hands strayed under his kilt like flowers blown against his naked skin. Beyond thinking, he stroked her hips. His hands without his will undid her male disguise and she took him into her.

Whether she was maiden or not, Duncan could not tell. She might have been, was his last waking thought.

As he slept on the hard, rocky floor of the cave, wrapped with this murderer-lass, a dream came to him.

"Duncan, beware! You lie with a witch, a changeling."

Duncan, in his dream, sat upright and cried, "Donald, cousin! What do you want of me?"

"Revenge. Take up your dirk and kill the witch."

"Donald, forgive me, but I swore on that very dirk to protect her."

"You have sworn ill, cousin." And from the face and breast of the apparition streamed blood, spattering Duncan until he woke.

"By Christ, Donald! Have pity on me."

Annie Stewart opened her eyes sleepily. "Honey-love, what's wrong?" Despite his shame his passions rose again and he went into her.

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Shivering when the cold air hit his sweating body, Duncan went to the mouth of the cave and looked out. First light crept across the valley. His horse he could see dimly in a patch of gorse down the path, where it had sheltered. "I must be gone," he muttered.

From somewhere below came the drone of bagpipes so faint Duncan could scarcely make out the tune: "The Flowers of the Forest." Seized with fear, he looked over his shoulder. But Annie was still asleep in the darkness.

When he looked again into the valley, he thought he saw a man walk up the path.

The wail of the bagpipes grew louder as the dark figure loomed nearer. Duncan's hair stood on end, and he smelled the bitter, bright odor lightning makes in the air.

The apparition stopped and said: "Farewell, cousin! Since you will na revenge my death, I shall see you na more till Ticonderoga."

Duncan fell to his knees on the path, doubled over with horror and guilt. Finally, he felt for his dirk in its sheath, but he had left it beside Annie in the cave.

THE NEXT YEAR, Duncan smoothed over his quarrel with Robert by saying that he had cast the murderer out where she was sure to die of cold, and so he was able to marry Donald's sister Elizabeth. He was perhaps too quick to forgive himself the sin of ill-advised swearing but reasoned that he had been tricked.

When his wife asked why he always wanted to roam, to go with the soldiers, he said only that he feared his death at a place called Ticonderoga. Since Donald had spoken of it, it must be a place nearby, so he would rove far. Duncan and Elizabeth had sons, fine military men, and Duncan himself became a major in the Forty-second Highlanders.

Everywhere that his regiment went, Duncan asked if one had heard this strange name, Ticonderoga, and no one knew even what land it was in, though some avowed it must be an Irish or a Scottish village so far set in the mountains that none had heard of it.

When Duncan was a man of forty-five, his Majesty sent the Forty-second Highlanders to serve under General James Abercromby, to take a

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colonial fortification, Fort Carillon, from the French. With Duncan went his eldest son and young Albert, the piper whose father had served when Duncan was young.

Duncan was used to cold, and rain, and meager rations, but the colonies imposed a different kind of hardship. When the Forty-second landed at Lake George, his brogues, stockings, and legs were covered with mud after only a few paces on the bank. Insects stung him, and in his Black Watch tartan the heat made his skin itch. Instead of the fine vistas of his homeland, there seemed only the endless lake, stinking of mud and shadowed by an impassably thick forest.

The French who held Fort Carillon under Montcalm were known to be few and poorly provisioned, but the French-allied Natives were fierce fighters who tortured their captives. Their weakness, he understood, was whiskey, and Duncan, like all his men, carried with him a small flask of Scotch whiskey, a possible barter for his life.

Duncan had private misgivings about Abercromby, who was never an enterprising commander, and at the moment, he suspected, had the flux from bad water.

Fort Carillon, Duncan understood, was a gateway to Lake Champlain and the other freshwater seas that the French held. Abercromby did have the imagination to realize that the thick forest was enemy to those who did not know the land. A magnificent waterfall was near the site of the fort, and yet the thunder of its waters seemed to come from all directions. So Abercromby determined that a small advance force, led by Lord Howe, his charismatic second in command, should scout the land around the falls and the fort, and should draw up maps for a plan of battle.

Howe's men stumbled into a French reconnaissance force and defeated it. But Howe, who had always been more popular than Abercromby, was killed, which much demoralized the entire army.

Abercromby determined that a smaller force should scout further, and Duncan was to lead this group.

So at dawn, Duncan and a group of Forty-second Highlanders, taking with them a bagpiper for communication and morale, set out toward the falls, led by the American colonial scout, Horatio "Polecat" Spotswood.

The troop trudged through deep wood and meadow, Polecat pointing out landscape features. Near the falls, they encountered a deep ravine.

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"By St. Andrew, there must be a clearing beyond," Duncan announced, "A good place for the French to reconnoiter."

"Tarnation, sir! There's foul water and varmints down there!" Polecat warned.

But Duncan crashed through thicket to the bottom, crossed a lively brook canopied by forest, and climbed the other side.

He clambered up, hauling himself by vines and roots smelling of crushed leaves, until, near the other side, he had to stop and rest. His hands and knees were raw from the rough bark and stones. The falls thundered nearby, but unseen, and he longed to plunge into cold water, to sooth the rash he had from the three-leaved vines and the insect bites.

As he drew breath, he saw a pair of dark, naked legs, only a few feet above him.

He raised his gaze to look into the sardonic eyes of a dark Native, who seemed amused by a kilted Scotsman's Black Watch tartan, sporran, and other regalia. Indeed, Duncan would have been equally amused at the outrageous costume of the painted Native, with its beads, leathers, and feathers, had his position not been so precarious.

"Je vais vous crever!" Duncan yelled, groping for his pistol. It was the direst French threat he could think, and he was certain this was a French-allied Indian. Worse luck, the man probably spoke no white man's language.

The Native held up a musket, still with an air of detached amusement. "I speak your language, English man. Your uniform, however, is strange. More beautiful than the French, the English, or any of the colonials."

"I'm Scots, damn it," said Duncan, lowering the pistol, but not putting it away. The Indian did not have a red ribbon tied around his musket to signal British alliance, and the weapon itself appeared to be of French issue. "Of the Forty-second Highlanders."

"Tell me why I should not kill you now," said the Native.

Duncan heaved himself up to the level of the Native and looked him in the eye. "I do not fear death today."

"All men die. Perhaps I have your death in my gun here. Or perhaps I shall put you to the test. Will you cry out, Highlander, when my brothers peel off your scalp, or roast you slowly? Can you keep silent, grub-colored man?"

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Duncan thought he could hear his heart beat, even over the roar of the falls. "I may be mortal, but I shall na die here, lad. A ghost has doomed that I shall die at a place called Ticonderoga."

The enemy laughed, a single barking laugh. "Do you not know the name of this place, Highlander?"

"The name is Fort Carillon, for the sound of the falls, which are called Carillon Falls."

"Listen to the water."

And Duncan listened to the chime-like falls.

"My people have a fancy that the falls sing a sound like Ti-con-de-roga."

Duncan felt cold wash over his skin as if the falls themselves had drenched him. At the same time, bagpipe music lilted over the ravine, playing "The Flowers of the Forest." Duncan glanced away from the Native, and when he looked back, the man was gone.

He shook his head, as if he had seen another ghost. *Ticonderoga!* The pipe music stopped, and the piper started another tune, "The Lament for the Only Son." It was his own piper, playing to lead him back to the scouting party.

When Duncan reported to Abercromby, he told the General that there was high ground, called by the colonial American Mount Defiance, and that Abercromby should put his cannon atop it, from whence he could bombard the Fort and force the French to surrender.

"No time, no time," said Abercromby, chewing his thumbnail. "Montcalm has reinforcements of seven thousand men who will join him by nightfall, and with them a huge complement of redskins."

"Begging your pardon, sir, but the Fort will contain na more than four hundred."

"They'll hold the Heights of Carillon, which is high ground, Major Campbell."

So the cannon sat useless, still on the batailles, and Abercromby ordered a Superintendent Johnson with his Natives to the top of Mount Defiance. Duncan bowed his head stoically before that stupidity, knowing their muskets did not have the range to discomfit the French.

Duncan fell asleep thinking of his homeland, which he knew he

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would never see again, of the gorse and bracken, the scent of purple heather, of beautiful Ben Cruachan and Inverawe, the lochs and the mountains all soft gray and green, of his sons at home and his son who was with him, and of his sweet Elizabeth. He dreamed that night of a man's voice, familiar from the shades of time: "Duncan, you may na turn away. Go to your death with honor." And a woman's: "Fly, Duncan. There is still time. In the forest your Black Watch tartan will be near invisible and you can after join your comrades and pretend you were in the battle."

"How could I face men who had braved death when I fled? How could I face my sons, or my Elizabeth?"

"Ah, Duncan, Duncan! You could be a landholder here. For women's company, you could have a Native lass, or I would come to you, not as a wraith, but alive and warm."

Duncan felt himself burn with love for life; he remembered the scent of every lass he had ever loved. He wanted to live.

But he wanted his own wife, his own sons, his own Highland castle, and most of all himself — his honor.

He awoke to the certainty of his fate. When the day of the battle dawned, Abercromby ordered his infantry, together with the Forty-second Highlanders, to storm the French defenses.

And then it became apparent what defenses the French had created. Montcalm, the French General, had ordered his men to fell trees, top branches sharpened and pointing toward the English enemy. It created an impenetrable thicket of branches and sharpened poles, all pointing outward. This wall of thorns and log-spears — called an abatis — was higher than a man's head, and thirty to forty feet in depth. French musketeers could hide in its depths and fire at will, but the British allies would be pierced on the branches, open to enemy fire. Their own bullets would do no good against the wall of branches.

When Duncan saw this he knew that he had met his doom. Abercromby was mad to think that anything short of cannon could make a hole in this wall. It was his fate to lead his men against this wall, his deadly fate.

The pipers played the tune that called for advance, and Duncan waded into the fray, loading and firing at every glint that might have been a French fleur de lys. Gunsmoke smelled harsh and hot as he fought. When he ran out of balls, he knelt amid the thicket and struck sparks with his

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flint. He managed to set several fires; but when he retreated a few paces, French soldiers quenched them with water.

Duncan still had his sword. Knowing that he was to die gave him a strange freedom. It was as if all the bonds of his nature had been cut loose. He struck at the branches with his sword, making headway toward the enemy. He had almost crawled through the last space into the French defenses when a sharp pain blossomed in his chest.

He stumbled a few feet further, then fell, hearing the piper play, "Are You Waking Yet, Johnny Cope?" A dark shape materialized above him.

"Whiskey," he said, soundlessly, and by some miracle the shape — it was his own son — bent over him and dribbled a few sweet drops on his lips. *I will die with my mouth full of Scotland after all,* thought Duncan.

And then he was in a mist. His son was gone, along with the roar of the battle. And yet he could smell the smoke and the raw, torn wood. A tall man came up on his right side. "Duncan, I've come for you. You swore amiss those years ago when you protected the Stewart woman. She was a liar, a witch, and a murderess, but she dazzled you as she did me, and I forgive you."

"Donald," said Duncan.

"Up with you, my kinsman. A short walk, and we can rest forever." He offered his hand.

But there was another shape, too. Breathless, its hair a dark corona, face shadowed by the blaze behind its head, it knelt and put a hand to Duncan's lips, wiping away the whiskey that had spilled from his mouth. "Duncan, truelove! I've come to save you."

"Annie," said Duncan. He remembered the murderer's name, Annie Stewart, though he had not thought of her for twenty years.

"Let me but kiss your wounds and we will fly from here. I will show you delights that the godly do na dream of."

Duncan could still see his dead cousin Donald looking down with warning. "I can say na more," said the ghost. "You know what she is."

And Duncan gave her such a look that she stepped back. From his death in a land between Ticonderoga and the afterworld, Duncan looked up at the fair-faced woman and at his cousin.

The smell of gunpowder and new-fallen trees had faded, but he heard pipes softly playing "The Flowers of the Forest," and it seemed that he lay

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in a bower fragrant with the strange flowers of a new world. He reached out, and his hand clasped a dirk. By the work on its handle he knew it to be the same blade he had sworn upon and left with Annie Stewart in a cave twenty years before. But it was his no longer. It had lain in Annie Stewart's bosom, and lost all sacred meaning.

It was as cold as if it had lain for twenty years beneath the falls of Ticonderoga.

He had kept his oath, and Donald had forgiven him. He had no need of Annie, or of the dirk.

It fell from his fingers and he heard the wind sigh over the heather below Ben Cruachan. He clasped Donald's hand and rose to walk the mountain of his soul's home.

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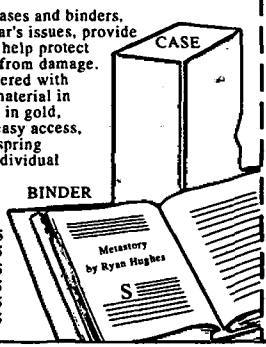

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A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

THE SCIENCE FICTION CENTURY: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

MY TITLE is a claim, of course, one that readers of this magazine might quite possibly accept.

In 1997 David Hartwell presented a mammoth tome with the same title, making the broad claim that in this last remarkable hundred years, "Science fiction did not aspire to take over literature, but reality."

Furthermore, in his view, "the overwhelming evidence is that American science fiction and the American market drive the sf world." Sf has "now outlasted all the other counterculture or outsider literary movements of the century" and "is read with ease and comprehension by the teenage children of educated adults who can derive little or no pleasure from it." Hartwell sees the genre as "attempts to get at the truth of the human condition in this century, so contoured and conditioned by science and technology."

Alas, I wish more people believed this were so.

Much of our culture still does not see science fiction (sf) this way — principally, I think, because we all have a built-in reflex: to accept the present as a given, ordinary, unremarkable. Yet today would have been a wonder to anyone of 1899, principally because of changes wrought by science. Unthinkingly anchoring ourselves in our moving Now, we do not realize how it came from Then. We cannot see our lives as taking place in our great-grandparents' awesome future.

Even as a boy, when I started reading Heinlein, Clarke, and the other modern masters, it took a while before I realized that most people thought that a "science fictional" concept meant it was somehow unreal, even absurd.

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In orthodox literature this is the common, unspoken assumption; the present world, so soon to be the stuff of nostalgia, enjoys an automatic, unearned privilege. In this the humanist tradition resists the culture of science — for sf is, fundamentally, best seen that way.

In America the genre came about through scruffy pulp magazines, beneath the contempt of modernist savants. This bias remains today, isolating the genre from the springs of mainstream attention. High church mysteries receive respectful notice (P. D. James, John le Carré); our best receive a paragraph of notice in the back of the literary bus.

To get at what we in this genre have all been about, one can inquire into how scientists make their own culture through sf.

I have had a long, winding involvement with modern science and fiction, the inevitable clash of the noble and imaginary elements in both science and fiction on one clean hand, with the gritty and practical way the world uses it, on the other soiled hand.

I estimate that half the scientists I know were heavy-duty sf fans, even if they now read little fiction at all. Many notable figures I knew — Edward Teller, Freeman Dyson, Leo Szilard, Stephen Hawking, Marvin Minsky, Martin Rees — read sf, and some even wrote it. Science feels the genre at its back, breathing on its neck in the race into the future.

Consider these quotations from across the century:

"It is the business of the future to be dangerous; and it is among the merits of science that it equips the future for its duties."—Alfred North Whitehead, 1911

"Denied the magic of mythology, we must have it in science — hence science fiction."—Edward Harrison, 1980

"Science is my territory, but science fiction is the landscape of my dreams." —Freeman Dyson, 1997

To me, this bespeaks a culture thinking aloud. Hartwell was right — sf speaks for science more than any other fiction (and often more tellingly than nonfiction). Its goal was to take over the real world, because slowly scientists became quite aware that, like it or not, their culture was doing just that.

Of course, it was easy to make mistakes, but more often through timidity than bravado. ("...computers in the future may have only 1,000 vacuum tubes and weigh only

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1/2 a ton." — *Popular Mechanics*, March, 1949.)

As change accelerated over the last two centuries, literature expressed anxieties and anticipations about it. In Mary Shelley's seminal novel, Frankenstein was the scientist's name, yet revealingly, most remember it as the monster's.

A telling hit. Often sf makes scientists into heroes, while conventional fiction (and much of Hollywood) fears them. Yet a century ago scientists were more likely to be depicted heroically. Why?

This has been principally a century driven by physics.

The nineteenth century was dominated by the metaphors and technological implications of two applied sciences: chemistry and mechanics.

Starting around 1899, electromagnetic theory and experiment gave us the telephone, radio, TV, and computers, and made the internal combustion engine practical — thus, the car and airplane, leading inevitably to the rocket and outer space. That fateful wedding of the rocket with that other monumental product of physics, the nuclear bomb, led to the end of large-scale strategic warfare — as profound a change as any in modern times.

Personally, I have never settled emotionally the tensions between the huge impact of physics and its abstract graces. They represent two quite different modes of thinking. I grew up amid the shattered ruins of Germany and Japan, with a father who had fought through World War II and then spent long years occupying the fallen enemy lands.

I took as a given that physics had stopped strategic warfare, not by uplifting mankind to higher consciousness, but by scaring it silly. Nothing in the half century since has changed my mind.

At the time, I did not realize how much that resolution came from ideas developed in sf.

For the central lesson of sf as a medium is that the highway between it and science runs both ways.

In the Wellsian era, 1890-1910, physics was exploring electromagnetic wonders and inventing both relativity and early quantum mechanics. Sf was concerned mostly with voyages in an ever-expanding landscape. It lagged science considerably, though its flights made without much scientific backing — time travel, other dimensions — were certainly imaginative.

Yet sf did take on ideas long before the general culture would face them. Throughout this century,

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conventional literature persistently avoided the gathering prospect of a conceptually altered tomorrow, retreating into a realist posture of fiction of ever-smaller compass.

Foregrounding personal relations, the novel of character came — in a classic pre-World War I debate between Henry James and H. G. Wells — to claim the pinnacle of orthodox fiction. James won that argument, banishing Wells from the citadel of high literature and conceding to him a popularity James did not enjoy in his time. But in so doing, James surrendered more than sales; he left the future itself to the genre that would later increasingly set the terms of social debate.

Of course, the genre is not a simple predictive machine. The science-fictional shotgun blast into tomorrow is bound to hit some targets. H. G. Wells, the Shakespeare of the genre, fired off more speculative rounds than anyone, and indeed helped bring about the tank in his 1903 "The Land Ironclads." Churchill remembered this tale during World War I and began the research which led to its battlefield use.

When Hugo Gernsback founded *Amazing Stories* in 1926, full-bodied quantum mechanics was being invented, mostly in Germany. Pulp sf dealt mostly with the wonders issuing from the physics of the Wellsian era — electromagnetism, wider explorations of the planets.

In World War II we saw John Campbell's Golden Age at *Astounding*, and simultaneously, the great explosion of physics into the perceptual world of the public.

By this time sf was breathing on the neck of physics, running just slightly behind the implications of discoveries. Since then, the two have been closely linked.

I learned throughout my career that speculation leads to serious study.

The usual version of the scientific method speaks of how anomalies in data lead theorists to explore new models, which are then checked by dutiful experimenters, and so on. Reality is wilder than that. More fun, too.

No one has impressed me more with the power of speculation in science than Freeman Dyson. Without knowing who he was, I found him a like-minded soul at the daily physics department coffee breaks when I was still a graduate student at the University of California at San Diego in the mid-1960s.

I was especially impressed that

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he had the audacity to give actual department colloquia on his odd ideas: notions about space exploration by using nuclear weapons as explosive pushers, and speculations on odd variants of life in the universe. He had just published a short note on what came to be called Dyson spheres — vast civilizations which swarm around their star, soaking up all available sunlight and emitting infrared. We might well study infrared emitters to detect civilizations, then.

Dyson at age eight wrote an sf novel, *Sir Phillip Roberts's Erolunar Collision*, about scientists directing the orbits of asteroids. He was unafraid to publish conjectural, even rather outrageous ideas in the solemn pages of physics journals. When I remarked on this, he answered with a smile, "You'll find I'm not the first."

Indeed, he descended from a line of futurist British thinkers, from J. D. Bernal of *The World, the Flesh and the Devil* to Olaf Stapledon to Arthur C. Clarke. In *Infinite in All Directions* Dyson remarked that "Science fiction is, after all, nothing more than the exploration of the future using the tools of science."

This was a fairly common view in those burgeoning times. In 1963, my first year of graduate school, I met Leo Szilard at department colloquia, avidly holding forth on his myriad ideas. Szilard had persuaded Einstein to write the famous letter to Roosevelt explaining that an A-bomb was possible, and advocating the Manhattan Project. He had a genius for seizing the moment. Szilard had seen the potential in nuclear physics early, even urging his fellow physicists in the mid-1930s to keep their research secret. And he read sf. He even wrote it.

I had read Szilard's satirical sf novel *The Voice of the Dolphins* in 1961, and his sf short stories, and from him heard the story, famous in the genre, of how in the spring of 1944 Cleve Cartmill published a clear description of how an atomic bomb worked in *Astounding SF*, titled "Deadline." Szilard mentioned to me that Cartmill's bomb would not have worked, but the story did stress that the key problem was separating non-fissionable isotopes from the crucial Uranium 235.

This story became legend, proudly touted by fans after the war as proof of sf's predictive powers. It was a tale of an evil alliance called the Axis — oops, no, the Sixa — who are prevented from dropping the A-bomb, while their opponents,

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the Allies — no, oops, that's the Seilla — refrain from using the weapon, fearing its implications.

As Campbell never tired of telling, in March 1944 a captain in the Intelligence and Security Division and the Manhattan Project called for an investigation of Cartmill. Why, for example, had Cartmill's story involved a "Hudson River Project," so close to "Manhattan"?

He suspected a breach in security, and wanted to trace it backward. U.S. security descended on Campbell's office, but Campbell truthfully told them that Cartmill had researched his story using only materials in public libraries.

Indeed, a Special Agent nosed around Cartmill himself, going so far as to enlist his postman to casually quiz him about how the story came to be written. The postman remembered that John Campbell had sent Cartmill a letter several days before the Special Agent clamped a mail cover on Cartmill's correspondence. This fit the day when agents had already visited Campbell's office. Campbell was alerting his writer, post-haste. Soon enough, Security came calling.

Sf writers are often asked where they get their ideas. This was one time when the answer mattered.

Cartmill had worked for a radium products company in the 1920s, he told the agent, which had in turn given him an interest in uranium research. He also fished forth two letters from Campbell, one written ten days short of two years before the Hiroshima bombing, in which Campbell urged him to explore these ideas: "U 235 has — I'm stating fact, not theory — been separated in quantity easily sufficient for preliminary atomic power research, and the like. They got it out of regular uranium ores by new atomic isotope separation methods; they have quantities measured in pounds...."

Since a minimum critical mass is less than a hundred pounds, this was sniffing close to Top Secret data.

"Now it might be that you found the story worked better in allegory," Campbell had advised, neatly leading Cartmill to distance the yet unwritten tale from current events.

Plainly Campbell was trying to skirt close to secrets he must have guessed. Literary historian Albert Berger obtained the formerly secret files on the Cartmill case, and as he points out in *Analog* (September, 1984), Campbell never told Cartmill that wartime censorship directives forbade any mention of atomic en-

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ergy. Campbell was urging his writer out into risky territory.

Cartmill was edgy, responding that he didn't want to be so close to home as to be "ridiculous. And there is the possible danger of actually suggesting a means of action which might be employed." Still, he had used the leaden device of simply inverting the Axis and Allies names, thin cover indeed. Campbell did not ask him to change this, suggesting that both men were tantalized by the lure of reality behind their dreams.

The Office of Censorship came into play. Some suggested withholding *Astounding*'s mailing privileges, which would have ended the magazine. In the end, not attracting attention to the Cartmill story and the magazine seemed a smarter strategy. Security feared that "...such articles coming to the attention of personnel connected with the Project are apt to lead to an undue amount of speculation."

Only those sitting atop the Manhattan Project knew what was going on. "Deadline" might make workers in the far-flung separation plants and machining shops figure out what all this uranium was for, and talk about it. The Project was afraid of imagination, particularly disciplined dreaming with numbers and facts well marshaled. They feared science fiction itself.

This set the mold. For in the 1940s Henry Luce's *Time* magazine announced that this was The American Century.

H. Bruce Franklin's *War Stars: The Superweapon and the American Imagination* has made the case that sf, particularly in the pulp magazines, strongly influenced U.S. foreign policy. In the 1930s Harry Truman had read lurid pulp magazine sf yarns of superweapons settling the hash of evil powers. Often they were held in readiness after, insuring the country against an uncertain future.

Truman wasn't alone. Popular culture's roots run deep. Time and again at Livermore I heard physicists quote sf works as arguments for or against the utility of hypothetical inventions, especially weapons.

One day while we were working on a different sort of problem, Edward Teller took a break and pointed out to me an interesting paragraph in an old paperback:

We were searching...for a way to use U 235 in a controlled explosion. We had a vision of a one-ton bomb that would be a whole air raid

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in itself, a single explosion that would flatten out an entire industrial center...If we could devise a really practical rocket fuel at the same time, one capable of driving a war rocket at a thousand miles an hour, or more, then we would be in a position to make almost anybody say "uncle" to Uncle Sam.

We fiddled around with it all the rest of 1943 and well into 1944. The war in Europe and the troubles in Asia dragged on. After Italy folded up...

The story was by Robert A. Heinlein, writing as "Anson MacDonald," titled "Solution Unsatisfactory" (May 1941 *Astounding*).

Teller noted that the story even gets the principal events in the war in the right order. "I found that remarkable," Teller said, describing how Manhattan Project physicists would sometimes talk at lunch about sf stories they had read.

Someone had thought that Heinlein's ideas were uncannily accurate. Not in its details, of course, because he described not a bomb, but rather using radioactive dust as an ultimate weapon. Spread over a country, it could be decisive.

In a way Heinlein had been proved right. The fallout from nuclear bursts can kill many more than the blast. Luckily, Hiroshima and Nagasaki were air bursts, which scooped up little topsoil and so yielded very low fallout. For hydrogen bombs, fallout is usually much more deadly.

In Heinlein's description of the strategic situation, Teller said, the physicists found a sobering warning. Ultimate weapons lead to a strategic standoff with no way back — a solution unsatisfactory. How to avoid this, and the whole general problem of nuclear weapons in the hands of brutal states, preoccupied the physicists laboring to make them. Nowhere in literature had anyone else confronted such a Faustian dilemma as directly, concretely.

Coming three years later in the same magazine, Cleve Cartmill's "Deadline" provoked astonishment in the lunch table discussions at Los Alamos, Teller said. It really did describe isotope separation and the bomb itself in detail, and raised as its principal plot pivot the issue the physicists were then debating among themselves: should the Allies use it?

To the physicists from many countries clustered in the high mountain strangeness of New Mexico, cut off from their familiar

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sources of humanist learning, it must have seemed particularly striking that Cartmill described an allied effort, a joint responsibility laid upon many nations.

Discussion of Cartmill's "Deadline" was significant. The story's detail was remarkable, its sentiments even more so. Did this rather obscure story hint at what the American public really thought about such a super-weapon, or would think if they only knew?

Talk attracts attention. Teller recalled a security officer who took a decided interest, making notes, saying little. In retrospect, it was easy to see what a wartime intelligence monitor would make of the physicists' conversations. Who was this guy Cartmill, anyway? Where did he get these details? Who tipped him to the isotope separation problem? "And that is vhy Mr. Campbell received his visitors."

I blinked. So the great, resonant legend of early hard sf was, in fact, triggered by the quiet, distant "fan" community among the scientists themselves.

For me, closing the connection in this fundamental fable of the field completed my own quizzical thinking about the link between the science I practice, and the fiction I deploy in order to think about the larger implications of the discipline. Events tinged with fable have an odd quality, looping back on themselves to bring us messages more tangled and subtle than we sometimes guess.

That era was not the zenith of sf's influence, though.

To the larger culture, after the 1950s visual sf was at least as important as anything in print.

Today, in visual media, sf rules. It delivers regular mega-hits. Fantasy, sf's market ally, enjoys exactly the reverse.

Huge fantasy trilogies dominate the bestseller lists, while little sf gets there in the 1990s. Yet fantasy has never led to large grosses for Hollywood, despite its apparent compatibility with the rise of special effects.

This suggests that sf penetrates to a very different part of the culture, and that its most effective tools may be its visions, as in Stanley Kubrick's *2001*, rather than its idea-heavy fictions. Fantasy may best appeal to deep emotional needs, and not depend as much upon special effects (seen one elf, seen 'em all) or wonders.

Space travel was the signature imagery of the genre — and it

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photographs well, too. (Biotech is not going to have it so easy.)

As far back as 1869 Edward Everett Hale's "The Brick Moon" envisioned manned artificial satellites. Sf had played out this idea in great detail by the time Arthur C. Clarke anticipated the huge impact of global communications satellites in 1945 (without patenting the idea, alas).

Space was a dead-on intuitive choice, mingling technology with vast horizons — and an easy one. Most sf advocates have hailed each predictive bull's-eye as though the authors were using rifles, when in fact the genre sprays forth a shotgun blast of *what ifs*. Heinlein anticipated the water bed and remote-control waldoes. Wells and others foresaw nuclear weaponry, mass bombing, and space travel.

Indeed, ever since Jules Verne's cannon-shot expedition to the moon, sf used space as a metaphor for the opening of the human prospect. Verne correctly set his cannon very near Cape Canaveral, arguing that the U.S. would probably lead the world in technological innovation, and southern Florida was energetically useful for launching, since one gained there the most centrifugal boost from the Earth's rotation. His choice of cannon over rockets seems to have come from a novelistic desire to link space with military means, another prescient shot.

Contrary to a common observation, half a dozen authors foresaw first moon landings watched by the whole world on television. Though visionaries like Heinlein incorrectly depicted the first moon rockets as built by private capital, in fact such companies did build the Apollo-era hardware; the money was first laundered through the government, though.

Some authors even saw that a U.S.-U.S.S.R. rivalry would be necessary to launch the Space Age. Large ideas needed big causes to drive them, a lesson we should not forget. Nothing grand is done offhandedly.

Sf has a love of the large, a reaction to Jamesian sitting-room drama. Changes in everyday life, which most concern real people, sf uses as background verisimilitude, not the focus.

While early optimistic sf thought automation would yield an easy cornucopia, by the 1950s Kurt Vonnegut's *Player Piano* saw how marginalized some people would become, a persistent problem. Few authors have seen any solution to this predicament, other than republics

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of leisure that inevitably run into the trap of bread-and-circuses distractions — an uncomfortable resemblance to many aspects of our present, with our exaggerated sports and entertainment which increasingly infiltrates politics and even science.

Rudyard Kipling predicted transatlantic air express in "With the Night Mail." Even the pulp-era death rays found their vindication in the laser beam, but in our lives lasers read CDs and serve as tiny, smart servants bearing information, not death.

Still, the genre did a conspicuous pratfall over computers. Well into the 1960s, writers clung to the image of a monolithic single machine worshipped by attentive mathematicians, missing the personal computer revolution.

Worse, starting in the 1930s they assumed that robots would confront us with the most profound puzzles of human identity. Sf robots were humanoid with advanced intelligence. Few imagined robots as routine monomaniac factory laborers, bolted in place. This meant that the issues of artificial intelligence were acted out by metal men we now know to be implausible, missing many of the deep conceptual problems the field confronts today. Artificial intelligences shouldn't look like us, because it won't really be like us.

How technology looks has become, thanks to TV and movies, more important than ever. Movie imagery matters; when Reagan advocated missile defense (advised in part by sf writers like Jerry Pournelle) the media dubbed it "Star Wars" — though Reagan never said the defense would be space-based. If politics is at basis a discussion of where we are going, what then is its natural literary medium?

Despite our rather dark impulses to control the shadowy future landscape, to know the morrow, it will be even harder in the science fictional worlds to come.

Scientists used to pay more attention to sf than anybody. (I mean the thinking genre, not knockoff Hollywood product.) I doubt that is so today, though surely it is still the genre that best expresses the unique power of their world view. As Dolly the sheep showed, the mass media and scientists alike had learned nothing from sf's groundbreaking work on cloning technology. We can expect more such blindness in the future.

Still, I am sure that the writers of sf's founding era, and perhaps of

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this one as well, would be pleased to hear that they have been so influential throughout this wrenching century. From the vantage of a few decades hence, as history comes into focus, the mainstream culture may fathom that we have passed through The Science Fictional American Century.

Somebody really was listening out there. Our writers are bards of science, as Poul Anderson has remarked.

Perhaps they are as well the unacknowledged legislators of tomorrow.

In the nineteenth century, missing the mark by a mile, Shelley (Mary's husband) thought that job fell to the poets.

Comments and objections to this column are welcome. Please send them to Gregory Benford, Physics Department, Univ. Calif., Irvine, CA 92717. Email: gbenford@uci.edu

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Lucy Sussex lives in Brunswick, Australia. She has edited several anthologies for readers young and old, including The Patternmaker *and* She's Fantastical. *Her own award-winning short fiction has appeared in anthologies and magazines like* Eidolon, The Horns of Elfland, Alien Shores, *and* The Women Who Walk Through Fire. *Her novels include* Deersnake *and* The Scarlet Rider.

By way of background for this sf story, she notes that Erewhon is not just the Victorian dystopia created by Samuel Butler. It's also the name of the sheep ranch Mr. Butler owned in the alpine area of New Zealand. Ms. Sussex spent summers there in her youth and greatly preferred the ranch to the novel.

The Queen of Erewhon

By Lucy Sussex

"HEY YOU! STORY-EATER! *Devourer of lives! Leave us alone! GET OUT!"*

Those are the first sounds on the tape: Idris spitting at me, refusing to be interviewed. I wind on a little, until I hear a different voice — Sadry speaking.

Sadry:...ghosts. The house at Erewhon could have been full of them for all anyone knew, for there was only our family of three and the hired hands rattling around the building. Erewhon had followed the Rule for generations, not that I knew that. I was only a child, I think three. Things hadn't got explained to me yet. I had no idea how odd my upbringing was, for the High country, with only one father.

One night I thought I heard crying, so I got out of bed, curious. I wandered along the upstairs corridor which all the sleeping rooms led off. When I got a little older, I learnt why this space was called "Intrigue," in all the Rule houses. It kinks and curves, with crannies for people to hide and overhear — hence the name.

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Me: A public space?
Sadry: Or a private one. I followed the sound to the outside wall, to a window with a recessed ledge. The shutters were closed and the winter curtains drawn, but between both was a space where someone might sit comfortably and that was from where the sound came. Now it sounded human, and female. I heard soft words, a male voice responding. Two people were hidden there! And curious, I stood and listened. But it was bitter frost weather, and rather than give myself away by teeth-chatter, I retreated until just round the corner I found a basket. It was filled with rags, either bought from Scavengers or our old clothes (Highlanders never throw anything away). So I climbed into it without making a sound, for it was an old Tech thing, of *perlastic*, rather than wicker. I curled up warmly in the contents and listened in comfort, not that I could understand much. Eventually I fell asleep, and woke in dawnlight to find my mother bending over me. And unthinkingly I blurted out the last words I had heard, which were: "I only want to be married to the one I love best, not all the others."

My mother said: "Where did you hear that?" and so I pointed at the ledge.

"The two lovers, there, last night."

She looked at me hard, then flung the curtain back. It wasn't me who screeched, it was her — at the sight of dust thick and undisturbed on the ledge. Then she scooped me up in her arms and went running down Intrigue, to the room she and my father shared, a small room, his younger son's room.
Idris: What did *he* do?
Sadry: Took us both into bed, calmed us down, for now I was hysterical too, and then very gently questioned me. What did the voices sound like? Could I imitate them? When I was as dry of information as a squeezed fruit, he said:

"It could have been any unhappy Queen of Erewhon."

And then he told me about living under the Rule, of his first wife, his brother, and their husband-lover.

Polyandry. The first time I heard the word I thought it a girl's name: *Polly Andree*. The misapprehension, though instantly corrected, stuck in my mind, so that I persistently thought of the woman at the center of these

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group marriages as a Polly. And here I was in Polyandry Central, as anthropologists called it, the Highlands of Suff, and I still couldn't shake my personal terminology. It was a bad slip to make when trying to convince Bel Innkeeper to find me space, in a town already filled to bursting for the Assizes.

"We call them *Queens*," she said.

I'd listened to tapes of Suff accents but the actuality was something else, my comprehension of it being delayed, with embarrassing pauses at the ends of sentences. When I finally understood, I replied, too hastily:

"I know. Like bees."

All the while we had talked on the inn's back verandah, a steady stream of fat brown bees had zoomed to and from some nearby hive, so this comment was both dead obvious and instantly regrettable.

Bel snorted. "You Northerners! Think you know everything, with your new-Tech ways! Ever seen a hive, ever seen a Rule House? No, that's why you're here, to find all about the funny Suffeners, isn't it?"

I said, carefully: "Okay, I'm what you call a story-eater, an anthropologist. But I can understand you've had a gutful of being studied and written up. I'm not here to sensationalize you, but to observe the court case."

Bel stopped folding the inn washing and gave me her undivided attention. "Why?"

"Because it's important."

"It's brought everyone down from the mountains and into this valley! How'm I supposed to house 'em all? And you, too."

She rocked on the balls of her feet, thinking. "Well, since you're here, I'd better be hospitable. And teach you about queen bees, too." She pointed at an outbuilding. "That's the honey-hut, and the one free space I've got. Take it or leave it!"

The hut was tiny: between pallet and beekeeping equipment there was barely any room for me. Above the bed was what I at first took to be a Tech photoimage, but it proved to be a window looking onto the mountains, made of the glass and wooden surround of a picture frame. In fact the whole building was constructed of scavenged oddments from the days of affluence: flattened tins, scraps of timber, and other usables slapped together in a crude but habitable mess. I was used to recycling,

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even in the neo-industrial North, but I had never seen such a higgledy-piggledy assortment before. It was to prove typical of much of the town itself.

I lay on the pallet and dozed for a while, lulled by the soporific hum from the nearby hives. When I woke, I tested my tape recorder — a precious thing, not because it was a genuine Tech artifact, but because it was a copy, its workings painstakingly rediscovered. Of course, it wasn't as good; nothing was, for we would never be as rich, nor as spendthrift, as our forebears. For over a century now, since the Crash, we had been adapting to an economy of scarcity. It was the adaptations, rather than the antiques, or the neo-copies, that interested me — particularly the Rule Houses, and at their center, the Queen Polly Andree. How would it feel, to have multiple husbands? And what would happen if you grew tired of them?

SADRY: My father said, "Nobody knows how the Rule began, just as nobody knows who bred the mountain Lori to be our herd animals. A Northerner, a story-eater, once told me the Rule was a pragmatic evolution, practiced by other mountain peoples. He said large populations cannot be sustained in marginal highland. One wife for several men — who are linked by blood, or ties of love — limits breeding, and means the family land can be passed undivided through the generations. It made sense; more than what the Lowlanders say, which is that we Highlanders deliberately chose complicated sex lives! Yet he spoke as if we were specimens, like a strain of Lori. That annoyed me, so I wouldn't give him what he had come for, which was my history.

"When I was the age you are now, my brother Bryn and I were contracted to marry Nissa of Bulle, who would grow to be our wife and Queen of Erewhon. When I was twelve and Bryn fifteen — the same age as Nissa — we traveled to Bulle to 'steal' our bride, as is custom. When we got back, Erewhon celebrated with the biggest party I ever saw and afterward Nissa spent the night with Bryn. I was too young to be a husband to her, though we would play knucklebones, or other children's games. That way Nissa and I grew friends, and then, after several years, husband and wife. But we lived without passion, all three of us. So when love did

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strike Nissa and Bryn, it did like a thunderbolt. And the lightning cracked through this house, destroying nearly everybody within it."

Market day in the Highlands is a spectacle, even without the added excitement of an Assizes and a sensational lawsuit. I woke early, to the sounds of shouts, goods being trundled down the main street, the shrill cries of Lori. When I came downstairs, the meal area of the Inn was full. Bel was cutting buckwheat bread; she handed me a slice, spread with Lori butter, at the same time jerking her head at the open door. I took the hint and went outside.

Immediately I found myself in the middle of a herd of Lori, who assessed the stranger intelligently from under their black topknots, then parted and pattered around me. The animal was a miracle of genetic engineering, combining the best of sheep, llama and goat, but with three-toed feet causing less damage to mountain soils than hooves. Like the other Highland animals it was dark, resistant to skin cancer; a boon in an area cursed with thin ozone, even so long after the Crash. Various studies had posited that the Lori designer might have been the social architect who engineered the lives of Highlanders with the Rule. If so, I wondered why human genes had not been manipulated as well, given that these people had insufficient protective melanin, varying as they did from pale to brown.

Suffeners met by sunlight would be shrouded in the robes of Lori homespun that served all purposes, from formal to cold-weather wear, wide flax hats and the kohl that male and female daubed around their eyes in lieu of the precious Tech sunglasses. But inside, or under protective awnings such as those strung over the market square, hats would be doffed, robes flipped back like cloaks, displaying bare skin, gaudy underrobes and the embroidered or beaded or tattooed emblems of the Highland Houses. It was a paradox: outwardly, dour Puritanism; inwardly, carnival.

I stood on the fringes, observing the display of goods and people. Nobody in sight was armed, well, not visibly, but I had read too many accounts of bloodshed and the consequent bloodprice not to sense the underlying menace in the marketplace. The most obvious source was the young men, who tended to ostentatious ornament, an in-your-face statement of aggressive sexual confidence. The women were less showy, but

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had an air of defensibility, as if being hard-bitten was a desirable female trait in the Highlands. Small wonder, I thought, recalling the mock kidnap in the marriage ceremony, and how common real raids had been until recently.

I felt a little too conspicuously a visitor, so bought a second-hand robe, the wool soft but smelly, and draped it over my shoulders. Thus partially disguised, I wandered among the stalls. A one-eyed man watched over Scavenged Tech rubbish, cans, wires, tires; a nursing mother examined the parchments of designs offered by the tattooist; a group of teenage boys, herders from their staffs, noisily tried on strings of beads; and two husky young men haggled over a tiny jar proffered for sale by an elderly woman. Hungry for overheard talk, information, I lingered by the tattoos, my interest not feigned, for I was particularly taken with one design, a serpent eating its own tail. Conversation ebbed around me, and I learnt the one-eyed Scavenger had found a new site, that the herders weren't impressed by the selection of beads, that the mother wished to mark that she now had children by all three of her husbands with a celebratory tattoo, and that the men were buying a philter or aphrodisiac, for use on a third party. Now I was slipping into the flow of Suff speak, I quickly comprehended the old woman's spiel:

"If Celat had tried *my* potion on Erewhon, none of this would have happened."

All within earshot involuntarily glanced up at the bulk of the biggest building in the town, the Courthouse/lockup. I had, in my wanderings through the market, seen many emblems of greater or lesser Houses, a distinction the Highlanders made by the size of the land holdings. The signs were displayed on people and also the stalls, signaling the goods that were the specialties of each House. I had been making a mental checklist, and had noted two emblems unseen: the blue swirl of Erewhon, and the red sword blade of Celat. Those entitled to bear them currently resided within the lockup, while the merits of their respective cases were decided. On the one hand, unlawful detention and threatened rape; on the other, abduction, arson and murder. No wonder the town was packed.

Sadry: The place of graves at Erewhon is a birch grove and as we walked through it, hand in hand, my parents named each tree: "This is Bryn's, this

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Moli the trader's, by chance at Erewhon that night and forever after." It was a peaceful spot, even with the new thicket of saplings, Nissa's work. I could believe that any ghost here would sleep and not walk — which was precisely why I had been brought there.

Idris: Nissa and her lover were buried in the snow, weren't they? Or at Bulle?

Sadry: I don't know...

[A clattering interruption at this point, the turnkeys bringing in that night's meal, the sound also coming from below, as the Celats, housed on the ground floor, were simultaneously fed.]

Sadry: On that day, or one soon after, I saw above the birches a line of pack Lori winding their way down the mountainside. Their flags had the device of a bee: Westron, our nearest neighbors. And that proved to be the first of many visits from the local and not so local Houses.

Me: Including the Celats?

Sadry: *[nods]* The message would always be the same: Erewhon has been decimated, and you need an alliance. That meant, me plus whoever was the highest bidder. But my father said to all and sundry that they had made such offers before, when he was the sole survivor of Erewhon House. And had he not responded by a second marriage with a lowland woman, outside the Rule? I, as his only child and heiress of Erewhon, also should have the opportunity of making a choice, when I was old enough.

Me: They agreed to that?

Sadry: With grumbling, yes.

Ever since contact was re-established between North and Suff, nearly a century after the Crash, anthropologists had been fascinated by the Rule. Much of their interest was prurient, with accounts of giant beds for the Queen and her consorts (a lurid fantasy, given the Intrigue configuration). I had in my pack a report positing the mechanisms by which Highland men could apparently switch from het monogamy, albeit with a brother or brothers involved in the marriage; to bisex, when an additional unrelated male entered the House, a partner for both husbands and wife; to homosex, with the Queen relationship purely platonic. It was not exactly light reading, but I persisted with it, lying on the pallet, the hum of bees filling my ears. In the end the graphs and diagrams were too much for me, and I simply stared at the wall and thought.

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On, for instance, how easily the complex relationships in a Rule marriage could turn nasty, Nissa of Erewhon being merely an extreme example. Yet divorce, with people "walking out and down," i.e., to the Lowlands or to join the itinerant traders, was uncommon. Highlanders had a vested interest in conciliation, in preserving the group marriages: that was why many houses contained Mediators, skilled negotiators. The ideal was embodied in a toy I had bought at the market, that little girls wore dangling from their belts: a lady-doll on a string, with a dependent number of men-dolls.

Why, I wondered, dandling the puppets, did sexual options not exist for women as well as men, with, say, linked girl-dolls? Were the Queens simply too busy with their men? Feeling frustrated, I wandered outside and found Bel attending to the hives.

"Come see!" she said, and so I donned over my Highland robes the spare veil and gloves hanging behind the hut door. Bel had lifted the roof off a hive, and I stared over her black shoulder at the teeming mass of insects.

"I think I understand," I finally said, "why a hive is unlike a Rule House.

She nodded, invisible behind her veil. "Ever see a Hive where the drones bossed the show? Or without any other female bees? It would be impossible...."

"As a House with two Queens?" I finished.

She straightened, holding a comb-frame in her gloved hand, staring across the valley at the Courthouse roof.

"You're learning, story-eater."

SADRY: Highlanders say when you die you go downriver, and that is what happened to me. My life at Erewhon with my parents, then my father only (after my mother went, as the Lowlanders say, underground) that is upriver to me. Everything since is the next life.

[She spoke with such intensity that I almost reached out and touched her, to belie the words.]

I went out alone after a stray Lori, the best yearling we had. Our herders had given up searching and my father was ill in bed, but I

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stubbornly kept looking. Most likely the animal had drowned, so I followed the Lori paths along a stream raging with snowmelt. Almost at its junction with the great river that runs from Erewhon to the lowlands, I saw a patch of color in a large thornbush overhanging the torrent: a drowned bird, swept downstream until it had caught in the thorns. But though it was shaped like the black finches of the Highlands, the feathers were white-gold-red: a throwback to the days before the hole in the sky opened. I wanted the feathers for ornament, so leant on the thornbush, to better reach out — but the bank collapsed beneath me.

The water wasn't deep and the bush cartwheeled in its flow, taking me, my robes entangled in the branches, into the great river. Up and down I was ducked, alternately breathing and drowning, torn by thorns, or dashed against riverstones. All I could do was grab at air when I could.... *[She paused and I again noted the fine white lines on her exposed skin, a tracery of thornmarks. Worst was the scar tissue in the palm of one hand, where she must have clutched at the bush despite the pain, in the process defacing and almost obscuring her birth marker, the Erewhon tattoo.]*

I think miles went by, hours — for the next thing I recall was the evening moon. I gazed up at it, slowly comprehending that I lay still, out of the helter-skelter race of the river, and that something wet and sluggish held me fast. From the taste of silt in my mouth I knew that the bush had stuck in the mudflats where the river widens. In the moonlight I saw solid land, shoreline, but when I tried to struggle toward it I found I had no strength left. But I lived! And surely my fathers' herders would soon find me.

Idris: You'd forgotten....

Sadry: On whose land the mudflats were. So I shivered through that night, until the morning sun warmed me. I had no protection against it, so covered my face with all I had, which was mud. Then I waited for help.

Idris: The next bit is my story:...

Sadry: *[laughing]* Tell it, then.

Idris: The river had lately brought we Celats a fine young Lori, fresh-drowned. So in hopes of further luck, I scavenged in the mudflats again. The bush sticking up like a cage, I noticed that first. Next I saw a faint movement like a crab, a human hand, then eyes looking at me out of the mud. I had to use the pack Lori to drag her out, she was stuck so fast, half-

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dead as she was. And the bird too, the one that had brought her to me, I found that when I washed the mud from her robes.

[She pulled from beneath her underrobe a thong, pendant from it a love-charm fashioned from tiny feathers, white-gold-red. Sadry almost simultaneously revealed a duplicate charm. I wondered again at the mixture of toughness and sentimentality of the Highlanders, then at the strength of this pair, one to survive near death from drowning and then exposure, the other to save her.... In my cozy north, teenage girls are babies, but these two had a life's hard experience.]

In the courtroom, they looked tiny, my quarry, against the black-clad might of the Highland Rule. The tribunal hearing this case consisted of a Judge from Chuch, the Suff capitol, a Northern Government representative, and the only empowered woman in sight, Conye of Westron. This Queen had been the subject of a classic study, so I knew her story well — but still boggled at the fact that this dignified old lady with the multiple tattoos had seven husbands.

I bent toward Bel, sitting beside me in the public gallery. "Now *she* is like the Queen of a Hive!" I murmured.

"Only because she outlived all her drones!" Bel replied.

Around us, Suffeners commented too, court etiquette permitting this background buzz, along with eating and the nursing of babies or pets.

" — I ain't disrespecting new dead, but old Erewhon was mad to say no to Westron — "

" — had a bellyful of the Rule, hadn't he — "

" — but risking all that House lore being lost — "

"Excuse me," said a male voice, from behind me. "You're the anthropologist?"

I turned to see a fellow Northerner, nervously holding out an ID. It read: Fowlds, journalist.

"I'm normally posted in Chuch, so I can't make head or tail of this mountain law," he said.

"And you'd like an interpreter? Meet Bel!"

The Innkeeper grinned, speaking slowly and precisely:

"The two girls in that dock are one party; the two men another. They tell their stories, and the judges decide who are to be believed."

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"Ah," he said. "And who is likely to be credible?"

Around us Suffeners sucked sweets and eavesdropped happily.

"Well," said Bel, "on the one hand we have a House wealthy and respected, but eccentric — maybe to the point of having gone just too far. That's Sadry of Erewhon, second generation Rule-breaker. On the other hand, Idye and Mors of Celat, a lesser House. Now they are Scavengers, but once Celat were mercenaries, hired trouble, before your North outlawed feuding."

It had been a condition of autonomy, I recalled, which had incidentally obviated the need to have a concentration of fighting men in the fortified Houses. And thus the need to create bonds between them, a prime function of the Rule?

"But the other girl is Idris of Celat? What is she doing with Erewhon?"

"That's what the tribunal is trying to establish," said Bel, as thunderous drumrolls sounded through the court, signaling the formal start of proceedings.

SADRY: I knew that somebody found me, but merely thought I had crossed into downriver, this life revisited, with a ghost Lori carrying me on its back to a ghost House. Somebody washed me and bandaged my cuts — I asked her if she was an angel spirit, but she only laughed. I slept, ate buckwheat mush when it was spooned into my mouth, slept again. The next time I woke, the room seemed full of men, all staring at me.

"Idris, do you know who she is?" said one, in a voice soft and smooth as a stroked cat.

"How could I?" said the angel.

"She looks like rotting bait," said another, so big and hairy I thought him an ogre.

"Idris, has she been instructing you how to treat her wounds?" asked the first.

Mutinous silence. Of course I had, for sick as I was, I was still an Erewhon healer.

"Only one way to find out!" said the third, twin of the second, but clearly the leader. He unwrapped the bandage on my right hand, to reveal the palm, which he inspected closely, picking at the scab with his nails.

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"Blue! The missing heir of Erewhon!"

Big hands lifted the pallet, carrying it and me out the door and along the Intrigue space. Somewhere along the way my raw hand struck rough stone wall, and a red haze of pain washed over me. Even the jolt as the pallet met floor again, in a larger room, I barely noticed.

"Where's that girl? Idris?"

"Here!" — but spoken as if through clenched teeth.

"Get her good and better, and soon, okay?"

And with that they left. The pain had cleared my head: now I could see that the angel crying as she re-bandaged my hand was only a girl my age, in a room too stuffed with Scavengers' rubbish to be ghostly.

"Which House is this?" I asked, after a while.

"Celat."

"Oh," I said. "Trouble."

"The thugs were Idye and Iain, my brothers; the smoothie Mors, Mediator of this House, and their lover."

"No Queen?" I asked, trying to recall what I knew of Celat.

"This is her room."

Idris stared into my face, as if expecting a reaction. Something was wrong, I could tell that.

She sighed, and added: "Our mother is years downriver." Her words and tone were like a trail, down which I chased a hunting beast.

"We've been too poor and disreputable for any marrying since."

The trail was warm now, and I guessed what I would find at the end of it would be unpleasant.

"Until you came along," Idris finished. "That's why they moved the bed. Don't you understand? They want you for Queen of Celat *and* Erewhon."

Indeed, an ogre with three male heads, ferocious game. I knew I had to fight it, or marry it, but how? More thinking aloud than anything else, I said: "I'd sooner marry you!"

Idris: *[triumphantly]* "And I said: Do you mean that? Do you really mean that?"

The hearing began with a reading of the various charges and counter-charges, then a series of witnesses appeared. I began to get a sense of Suff

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law, as the bare bones of the case, what was not disputed by either side, was established. But the mix of ritual and informality in the proceedings disconcerted me, as when Bel waved wildly at some witnesses, a married trio from Greym House. They waved back, before resuming their evidence: that they, being river fishers, had found a hat with blue ties in their net.

"At least there's no argument she fell in the water," Fowlds commented.

Mors of Celat rose and bowed at the judges. I thought him a personable young buck, not as loutish as Idye beside him, with a feline, glossy look — if you liked that sort of thing. An answer to a virgin's prayers? Not from the look of black hatred that passed between him and the two girls.

"Can he address the court? I mean, he's an accused," Fowlds murmured.

Bel had gone rushing out of the gallery, leaving me to interpret as best I could.

"As a Mediator Mors is privileged to argue points of law."

"They're marriage counselors, right?"

"Among other things," I said. "Things get fraught, you need someone like that. Otherwise you might end up like Nissa's Erewhon."

"Oh, the case people keep on mentioning," he said.

"They're similar, that's why."

"But wasn't that a mass poisoning..." he began, but I shushed him as Mors began to speak.

"I bring the attention of this court to the law of the Scavengers...."

"Cheeky beggar!" somebody muttered.

"Huh?" said Fowlds. I was feeling confused myself.

"Er, I believe it's basically finders keepers."

"But it's not been applied to living humans since feuding days," Bel finished, from behind my shoulder.

"But there's a precedent?"

"Oh yes. Oh my!"

Idris had leapt up, shouting:

"I found Sadry, so she's mine! Not yours, not anybody else's."

Conye of Westron rose, and moving effortlessly despite her age, placed herself between the pair, her arms stretched out, invoking quiet.

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"Another Mediator," said Bel. "She'll adjourn the court now, and let people cool off. It's getting late, so I guess they'll call it a day."

"See you in court tomorrow, then," said Fowlds. He bent toward me. "You're an anthropologist, so is it true that these mountain guys are hot trots?"

"Why don't you find out?" I said.

"Oh I will!" — and he wandered away.

Bel said: "Come and meet a non-bee Queen."

SADRY: Idris's brothers left us alone, but Mors would bring some small comfort, like fresh milk, sit on the end of the pallet, and talk, playing mediator.

Idris: The thin part of the wedge.

Sadry: The thick part being your brothers. I put no trust in him, but he was too engaging for me to keep sulking. It became a game, to talk and parry his flirtation. That way courtship lay, I knew.

I asked: "What brought you to Celat?" and he looked rueful: "Love. Or a potion. Or perhaps both."

Idris: *[sarcastic]* Men are such romantics.

I said: "And you've stayed here?" — looking pointedly around the Scavengers' mess.

He said: "I mediate when Idye and Iain get into trouble."

"Like now?" I said.

He sighed. "This wasn't my idea. But as a challenge, I find it — seductive."

"As opposed to rape?"

He said, lightly: "You know that is the last resort."

I must have gone white, for he added: "But that would mean I'd failed. And I'd hate that."

When he had gone, I said to Idris:

"I suppose he's not too bad."

On the wall hung the one precious thing I had seen in Celat, a Tech mirror. Idris abruptly lifted it down and set it on my chest, holding it with both hands, so all I could see was my scratched face.

"You think, you really think pretty Mors courts you for love, when you look, as Idye charmingly said, like rotten bait!"

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"No," I said, sobered. She touched my cheekbones.

"I can see under the surface, but *they* can't. That protects you for the moment. But when you heal...."

I said: "Get word to my father!"

She hesitated, before replying: "Mors came from the market with the news your father's dead. Of sickness or worry, they say. And so Erewhon is vacant and everyone's looking for you."

I cried at that, and she kissed away my tears. After a while I said:

"Then we must get out of here all by ourselves."

The Queen proved to be the fisher-girl from Greym, whom we found, together with her husbands, in Bel's private attic rooms. The trio were replete with honeycake and a keg of the weak Highland beer. Close to, they seemed painfully young, in their mid-teens at most, the two obvious brothers and the girl touchingly in love with each other. Bel introduced them as Milat and Meren and Jossy, saying of the latter:

"Pregnant, she tells me, but she won't say by whom...."

Jossy grinned with gap-toothed embarrassment. The boys were more forthcoming:

"Aw, she's just kiddin' you, Cos."

Indeed, I thought, the Rule was strict regarding sexual access, precisely to prevent squabbles over paternity. Then I did a delayed doubletake at the last word spoken. Cos meant *cousin*....

I stared at Bel. "I thought you were a lowlander."

"Not always," she said. "Once I could have been a Queen."

Milat coughed. "Aw, that's old history now."

I was starting to catch on. "You walked out and down from Greym? Why?"

Bel replied with a question. "You like men?" she said, looking at Jossy. "You like lots of sex with men?"

Jossy giggled; the boys exchanged glances, tolerant of their eccentric relative.

"I'll take that as a yes," Bel said. Then, more to me: "But if you don't, then there's no sense living in misery. I had a pretty young cousin, who would never question the Rule. So I gave my husbands to her."

"Our mam," said the boys proudly.

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"These are her twins. I had no children, so I walked free."

She smiled at them, on her face the lines of a hard life, lived good-naturedly and without regret.

"What did you do?" I asked.

"Came down to the village and this Inn, where I asked for work as a kitchenhand, anything. And here I stayed, with Bel, who owned the Inn. When she went underground, I took her name and carried on the business."

She poured out more beer, and sliced the remaining cake. As she did, I noticed a tattoo extending from the palm of her hand to the wrist: an oval enclosing two stylized bees, under a gabled roof.

"Two Queens in a House?" I asked softly, as she passed me the cake.

"No," she replied, "Two worker bees in their Inn."

I took her hand, to better examine the device, and then noticed the pigment of one bee was faded, and that it was drawn differently from the other. It also looked vaguely familiar — and I whistled softly as I recognized a birth marker, the bee of Westron modified into an emblem that was all Bel's own.

"With your bee-skills, I should have guessed you were born at Westron."

I released her hand.

"As you're a relative, I wonder if you might get me an interview with Queen Conye. She's an interesting woman."

A guarded nod. Press on, I thought.

"I'd like that," I said. "Almost as much as I'd like to talk to Sadry and Idris."

"Easier said than done," she said.

"Well, yes."

"Conye's cranky on me, for letting the House down." She paused, and what she said next nearly floored me. "But I can get you into the lockup." She turned to the Greym three: "And you didn't hear that, did you?"

"No, Cos," muttered one of the boys, and I began to realize the powers of this extraordinary woman.

Sadry: Erewhon's symbol is a blue swirl, the river of life, for it is knowledge of illness that is the strength of our House, just as Dusse has botany and herbalism, and Westron the secret of mead.

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[I nodded, thinking that it was as if when setting up the Rule someone had determined that the precious Tech knowledge and goods be apportioned equally between Houses.]

Sadry: In our cellars, cut deep into the mountainside, we hoard the artifacts of Tech medicine.

Me: I heard you had a pharmacopoeia.

Sadry: Yes, a book of the colored beads that the Tech people didn't wear but ate, to keep themselves well. That we salvaged ourselves, other books the Scavengers bring us. Our oldest book, though, isn't medical — it's called Erewhon, but it's not about my House, but a dream, a nowhere place. In this book things are reversed: the sick are criminals, and the criminals regarded as ill.

Idris: Are we criminal, or ill?

Bel: Both, probably, in the eyes of the men.

Sadry: The book-Erewhon seemed strange, but not much stranger than the Rule. Or the way I would live in my home, with Idris, if the court permits us. *[I thought, but did not say, that while Bel could live in the Lowlands, a happy impossibility in Highland terms, two Queens in the same mountain House was probably intolerable for the Rule-followers. Sadry was Queen of Erewhon by inheritance, but if this case went against her she could end up Queen of Nowhere.]*

The Greym three had had a big, exciting day and they drooped like flowers with the dusk. Bel brought them blankets, letting them doze on her private floorspace. After she blew out the candles (Highland style, of rush and tallow), we two retired to the downstairs bar, where she ejected the last drinkers. Now we had the place to ourselves I wanted to interview this runaway Queen, but instead Bel went out. Alone, I stretched out on the hearthrug and watched the fire, thinking of the Houses and their troubles. As I lay there, unbidden came to mind the memory of an interview tape I had once heard, with an anonymous woman of Bulle.

Bulle woman: The Rule is: share and share body alike in marriage. That's why Queens seldom have a night to themselves once they wed. It's best if you're stolen by brothers, because they're like beans in the pod, so you treat them the same. But if you've got one you like less, or one you love most...that means trouble. Poor silly Nissa!

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Interviewer: It was the lover that was the problem, wasn't it?
Bulle woman: His name was Yeny. I met him once, and wasn't surprised that Bryn Erewhon was head over heels, why he brought him into the marriage. The trouble was Nissa fell for Yeny too, and she wanted him all for herself, like a Lowlander. The sensible thing would have been to let those two walk out and down, but Bryn was stubborn, I guess, like Erewhoners are. He called in a Mediator, but that didn't work. So Nissa took matters into her own hands.

Slowly, imperceptibly, I slipped into dream-sleep, images appearing and disappearing before my slitted eyes. First I saw the blue sign of Erewhon, the river twisting into a figure eight, an infinity symbol, then the self-devouring serpent I had admired at the tattooist's. A log collapsed in the fireplace, and I opened and closed one eye, importing the flamescape into my dream, for now I flew above red mountains. Below my eagle-I were Houses, and I zoomed in and somehow through the thatch roof of Erewhon, to see Nissa (who looked amazingly like Sadry) zigzagging through Intrigue. She went down a flight of stone steps to the courtyard where a Scavenger waited with goods for identification and sale: sheets of dirty foil, on one side covered with symmetrical white studs. The dream-watcher followed Nissa into the cellars, where she consulted a tattered book. When she came out again, she paid the Scavenger, and tucked the drugs into her underrobes.

I felt her cold hand — then realized it was Bel, shaking me awake.

"Come on! I've bribed you an hour's talk!"

"Wh...?" I started to say, then received a spare robe full in the face, and with it the realization of where we were going.

"Hurry! Wrap yourself up!" she said.

Doubly shrouded we slipped into the darkness of the street, the mountain air chill even in summer. The village at first seemed asleep, with the mountains looming over it as if over a cradle, the gleam of snow at their peaks like watchful eyes. But as we moved swift and silent as Loris, I noticed cracks of light under shutters, heard babies' cries or soft talk, and saw distantly, in the gap between two buildings, a group of men carousing around a bonfire, among them Fowlds.

"He'll get slipped a philter and good and proper fucked," Bel commented.

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"That's what he wants," I said.

After what seemed an age Bel finally led me into a dark doorway I slowly realized was a back entrance to the Courthouse. Inside, someone waited for us, robe thrown completely over the head, almost like Bel beekeeping. The apparition led us up stairs of scavenged Tech concrete to the second floor, where a door was unlocked for us, then locked behind us.

Sadry was awake, spinning Lori wool on a spindle, the Highland cure for fidgets, or using up time. I could see for the first time her scars, and her composed, indeed, queenly mien. Idris slept, her head on Sadry's knee; she stirred as we approached, knuckling her eyes. For a long moment there was silence, before Bel fumbled under her robe and produced delicacies: fresh Lori cheese, fruit, cured meat.

"Greetings Bel Innkeeper, greetings Northerner," Sadry said, her voice neutral as she accepted the gifts.

I had nothing to offer, but nonetheless pulled out my tape recorder from under my robes. Idris goggled at the device, then said to Sadry:

"What, our words to be set down and used against us?"

"For an interview," I said, alarmed, "It's standard practice."

"I didn't agree to a Tech toy," Sadry said. She looked at Bel. "Your intermediary never mentioned it...."

Idris reached forward, as if to snatch away the device, and I clutched it, inadvertently activating Record. She spoke, her voice a snarl, rising...until Bel clapped a hand over her mouth.

"Hush," she said. "Would you wake the guards? When the Northerner is like me, and like you!"

Idris's eyes rolled.

I said, my voice trembling, now I was so near to my goal, and yet not there yet: "I...we...my friends...we monitor...looking for...breakers of the rules...even in such a male-dominated society...you see, it's so important that you exist, we need a record...of women loving women...that's why I want your story!"

The gaze of these two girl lovers met, considering my plea.

I started the interview story-eater style, using the polite Highland opener of recounting my latest dream. One dream demands another, and

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so Sadry responded with her ghost story, continuing the theme of Nissa, which recurred as if haunting the conversation:

SADRY: My father said he got sick of it, Bryn moping, Nissa storming, and Yeny in the middle (who was not *his* lover) unable to make up his mind. So he went off herding....

Idris: It saved him from a dose of worm-cure!

[I thought of my dream again. If Bel had not shaken me awake, I possibly might have continued the dream, with Nissa-Sadry one snowy night serving her in-laws a Bulle herbal remedy, but combined with what from the pharmacopoeic texts in the library she knew to be sleeping pills. Presumably she wanted everyone in the House to sleep long enough for her and her lover to elope. Murder meant feuding, and mass murder surely a civil war. Her bad luck then, or her curse, as the Highlanders said, that the pills were contaminated, or when combined with the herbs, toxic. Ten people died at Erewhon, two more when Nissa's flight ended in an avalanche — incidentally saving, as the Bulle woman had noted, that House from a ruinous bloodprice.]

Me: What saved Mors?

[They eyed me. This I knew was the nub of the case, whether the story of Nissa had repeated with Sadry.]

Idris: He was called away to Mediate, in a dispute over some Lori.

Me: And with only two men left in the house, you acted.

Idris: They got drunk as pigs.

Me: On pissweak Highland beer?

Idris *[defensively]:* Maybe they had mead.

Me: That's a luxury. You said Celat was poor.

Sadry: What is this? An interview or an interrogation?

Bel: It will help you! And you need help.

[Long pause]

Me: What happened?

Idris: I cooked for my brothers that night, and then went upstairs with sop for Sadry. We could hear roistering below, and I barred the door of the Queen's room with what I could find and move...without Mors to mediate, Sadry wasn't safe.

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Sadry: The House went quiet.
Idris: I went down to see what was going on, and found my brother Iain passed out at the table. Idye was the same, sprawled in the courtyard. Without losing a moment, I went out to the field where our two best and biggest Lori grazed. I brought them into the courtyard, found halters and saddlecloths, then tied them by the door, while I went into the house for my queen.
Sadry: I could barely walk, so she near carried me downstairs, and got me onto the Lori.
Idris: I went upstairs to get extra robes against the night air, but having a sudden idea, grabbed rags, and a haybale I had been using to re-stuff a pallet. With them I formed a mock Sadry under the blanket in the Queen's room.
Sadry: That done, just like that! We stole away into the darkness, heading for Erewhon.
Idris: *[hesitant]* We don't know what happened next.
Me: I hear Idye was too drunk to remember a thing.
Idris: I was right to take her! Iain went into the Queen's room!
Me: He was fuddled.
Sadry: He meant harm.
Idris: But in igniting the dummy Queen, he harmed nobody but himself.
Me: And the House.
[I thought again of the Inn fire, of the log imploding in a shower of sparks. Celat House and its flammable rubbish had burnt like Bel's kindling, leaving ashes — in which Mors and a party from a neighboring House had found the charred form of Iain, a metal candleholder and long-bladed hunting knife by his side. Idye had survived, simply because he had slumped in the courtyard, out of the flame's reach.]
Sadry: We defended ourselves.
Me: I understand that, but to the extent of doing a Nissa?
Idris: That is for the court to decide.
Bel: We should stop now. The guard's shift ends soon, and I could only afford one bribe!

And she turned the recorder off. End of conversation, with the two defendants, but not with Bel, for when we got back to the Inn she stoked the fire and poured out beer for us.

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I took a couple of mouthfuls, and said: "This stuff really is feeble. I reckon Idris nobbled her brothers' beer!"

Bel shrugged. "All the village thinks so, but with what?"

Now it was my turn to shrug. "I've seen a pharmacopoeia book in a museum. It described everything the Tech culture took for their ailments. So, if something drastically increased the effects of alcohol, Sadry would have known it and told Idris."

Bel pulled off her outer layer of robe. "Maybe."

"But how did they get hold of it?" I wondered.

"The House was full of Scavenged goods, remember?"

"Good point. Anything could have been stored there." I rolled out on the rug again, watching flames.

Bel hunkered down beside me. "Well, if we are play judges, and have solved the mystery, what do we do now, given the important difference between this case and Nissa's? Idris and Sadry survived, and that means they are answerable for bloodprice."

"Even for an accidental death," I replied, with a sinking feeling.

"And the fratricide makes it worse. Not to mention burning the House, and stealing Idris, the one thing Celat had to barter on the marriage market."

I supped more beer. "Extenuating circumstances. Sadry escaped enforced marriage."

"But she also broke the Rule."

"Into little pieces," I finished, putting down the mug. "They don't stand much of a chance, do they?"

Bel put her hand on my shoulder. "That was why I took you to the lockup, to collect their story, and disseminate it over the North."

I turned, and her grip grew firmer, kneading me.

"And, because I wanted you to be grateful to me."

I laughed and quoted Idris: "'Do you mean that? Do you really mean that?'"

I had come to the mountains a detached, dispassionate observer, with a story to eat. But, almost despite myself, the case study of Sadry and Idris, and the other like-minded women of the Highlands had come to involve me. Taking Bel's hand in mine, I touched her bees and felt them slightly raised — a cicatrice. Tonight, we would play Queens of the Inn, and the

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two bees would crawl all over my skin. And tomorrow, to celebrate, I would go to the market tattooist and mark myself with the snake — for now this mountain herstory was part of me, and I was a serpent eating my own tale.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

October, 1949: The U.S.S.R. exploded its first atomic bomb, President Truman watched the developments in Korea closely after mainland China fell to Communist insurgents, Casey Stengel completed his first year as skipper of the Yankees by taking four of five World Series games from the Brooklyn Dodgers, and the Mystery House team of Spivak, Boucher, McComas, Ferman, and Mills launched a new digest called simply *The Magazine of Fantasy*.

October, 1999: The various Soviet socialist republics are no longer a union, President Clinton watches the developments in Kosovo closely, DELETED FOR SECURITY REASONS win the World Series in six games, and Mercury Press publishes the five-hundred-and-seventy-eighth issue of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*.

We haven't handed the umpire our final lineup yet, but we can promise that Bradbury leads off with a guest editorial and Sturgeon, Goulart, Carroll, Le Guin, Shepard, Ellison, Wilhelm, Merril, Silverberg, and Bisson will all be starting. Bonestell provides the cover and there's a treat inside from the weird pen of Mr. Wilson. And can it really be possible that "Acceptance Speech" is the first story we've run from the author of "But Soft, What Light..." since April, 1966?

In the dugout wait sluggers like Scott Bradfield, Eleanor Arnason, Amy Sterling Casil, S. N. Dyer, and Albert Cowdrey. They look ready to play.

In 1949, the ticket price for four issues was $1.40. In 1999, a season ticket for eleven games still leaves you enough change for a hot dog and soda...and every seat in the stadium has a great view.

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CURIOSITIES

"THE STRANGE CASE OF CYRIL BYCOURT" BY ERNEST BRAMAH (IN *MAX CARRADOS MYSTERIES*, 1927)

IN THE OLD days of fair-play mystery writing, there was a stern rule against invoking the supernatural. Rules are fun to break, though, and some Golden Age detectives had the occasional weird, eldritch encounter.

Ernest Bramah's blind sleuth Max Carrados isn't far from being a fantasy character himself. He effortlessly reads newspapers by touch, and aims his pistol at villains by ear: "He fired now into the centre of the 'Damn!'" Not only can his sensitive fingertips detect a forged coin, but from stylistic evidence he then deduces who forged it.

Mostly Carrados tackled rational mysteries. But in his second oddest case, "The Eastern Mystery" (in *The Eyes of Max Carrados*, 1923), he explains a lucky talisman that actually seems to work, by pointing out that although the thing is supposed to be a tooth of the god Hanuman it's actually a rusty nail, nearly 1900 years old....

Strangest of all is the affair of Cyril Bycourt, a boy heir who's being terrified into an early grave by nightmares of a veiled man waiting to haul him away on a plague-cart. "Bring out your dead!" After checking that the lad hasn't been morbidly reading Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*, Carrados investigates — to find that this house has its own electrical generator in an outbuilding, and there's a power outlet right by Cyril's bed.

The solution is an obvious manifestation of what the *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* calls "technofantasy." That generator shed was built over an ancient plague-burial pit, and evil emanations are traveling along the wires to leak (just as James Thurber's mother thought electricity behaved) out of the socket and into Cyril's dreams. Elementary!

Bramah also famously created the Oriental raconteur Kai Lung...but that's another story.

—David Langford

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- Short stories by Kate Wilhelm, Terry Bisson, Gene Wolfe, Jonathan Carroll, Brian W., Aldiss, Robert Sheckley, and others.
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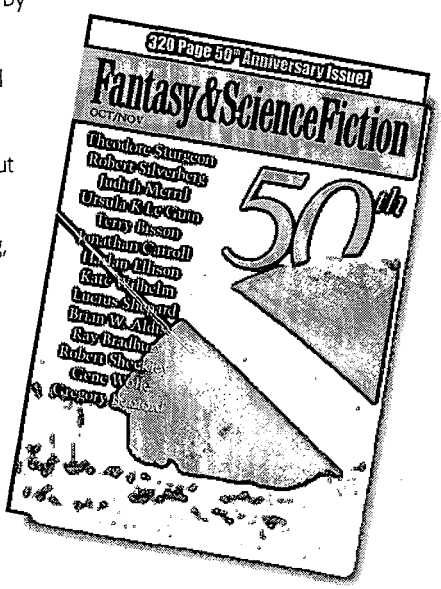

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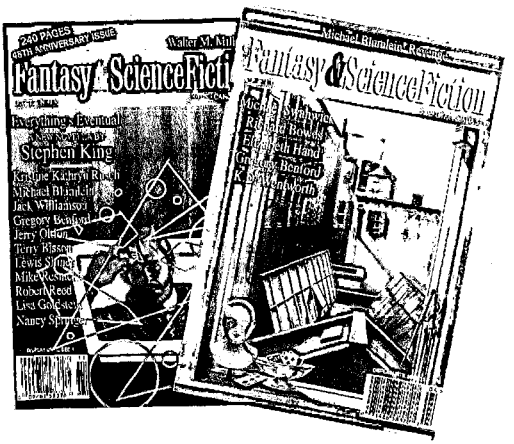

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